

DOES EXCEPTION PROVE THE RULE?
TRACING THE DISCOURSE OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

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Declaration

I hereby declare that no parts of this thesis have been accepted for any other degrees in any other institutions. This thesis contains no material previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

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Abstract

The first two decades of the twenty-first century saw an unprecedented proliferation of the discourse of American exceptionalism both in scholarly works and in the world of politics; several recent contributions have characterized this notion in the context of a set of beliefs that create, construct, (re-)define and reproduce a particular foreign policy identity. At the same time, some authors also note that the term “American exceptionalism” itself was born in a specific discourse within U.S. Communism, and, for a period, it was primarily understood with reference to the peculiar causes behind the absence of a strong socialist movement in the United States. The connection between this original meaning and the later usage is not fully explored; often it is assumed that “exceptionalism” existed before the label was created as the idea is traced back to the founding of the American nation or even to the Puritan origins rooted in the colonial period. Certainly, there are some important ideational continuities in this tradition. However, it is still puzzling *how this specific expression has become so popular at this particular point of history, and how the term has been transformed in various contexts of American politics and foreign policy.*

This dissertation examines “exceptionalism” as a *keyword* and asks *how the term “American exceptionalism” has been used since its first recorded appearance.* As the term originally came from interwar Marxist terminology, I explore how its meaning has evolved from this starting point. While this approach cannot account for a complete intellectual history of the ideas associated with exceptionalism, the aims are more modest here. By pointing out the relevance of this particular line of thought, this work supplements existing analyses of exceptionalism and uncovers the linguistic actions engrained in specific formulations. For this, instead of taking the meaning of the term as fixed or predetermined, its content – as prescribed by the methodologies of the Cambridge School of intellectual history and German conceptual

historians – should be discerned from its usage. Hence, I propose a form of *discourse-tracing* that highlights the multilayered and historical nature of the discursive development. This does not find a clear linear path from one articulation to another; the emphasis is rather on the interactions between different discursive layers as the idea moves between various contexts and spheres while it serves certain functions in a scholarly, intellectual, or political agenda.

Exceptionalism, by definition, needs to reflect an understanding of *both* exception and rule; the particular and the universal. The analysis notes that the invocation of the term was often connected to a reinterpretation of the relationship between particularism and universalism under a perception of crisis in which previously established meanings were questioned. During these periods, agents *used* exceptionalism to advance political objectives and to shape collective understandings. This examination contributes to existing interpretations of exceptionalism by noting why certain reinterpretations could succeed while others fail; and by observing the shifts in the trajectory of the discourse. Moreover, it helps to understand the social-political contexts in which contestations happen and long-lasting decisions are made. This mode of analysis also emphasizes the back and forth movement of ideas between the academic and the political spheres; thus, it can also shed light on the development of those discourses that happen in the important boundary locations between politics and intellectual engagements.

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in New Haven; and in the Harvard University Archives at Pusey Library in Cambridge. In each of these places, the library staff was extremely friendly and helpful, which greatly facilitated my research.

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Introduction

Three months into his presidency, Barack Obama was asked by a *Financial Times* reporter during the NATO summit in Strasbourg whether he subscribed to the “school of American exceptionalism that sees America as uniquely qualified to lead the world.” Obama, in his response, much celebrated and criticized ever since, attempted to reinterpret the notion:

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

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.

Now, the fact that I am very proud of my country and I think that we've got a whole lot to offer the world does not lessen my interest in recognizing the value and wonderful qualities of other countries, or recognizing that we're 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.

And so I see no contradiction between believing that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity, and recognizing that that leadership is incumbent depends on our ability to create partnerships, because we create partnerships because we can't solve these problems alone.¹

Obama's Republican opponents immediately jumped on the perceived relativism implied in the first sentence of his response (often ignoring the rest), and soon they made Obama's lack of “adequate” appreciation for “exceptionalism” the centerpiece of their criticism of the president. For the first time in the history of the term, presidential contenders and influential Republicans transformed exceptionalism into a widely-used political slogan, even making it one of the overarching themes of the 2012 party convention.²

¹ Barack Obama, “The President's News Conference in Strasbourg,” April 4, 2009. Gerhard Peters and John T. Wooley, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/286249>.

² See, for example, Newt Gingrich with Vince Haley, *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 2011); John Dickerson, “Exceptionally Thin: Rick Santorum's critique of Obama's foreign policy doesn't withstand scrutiny,” *Slate*, April 29, 2011, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2011/04/santorum-on-obama-his-critique-of-the-president-s-foreign-policy-makes-no-sense.html>; Mitt Romney, “Speech on Foreign Policy at the Citadel,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 2011,

In the run-up to the election, both Obama and the eventual Republican nominee, Mitt Romney, offered a vision of exceptionalism, though their uses of the term differed markedly. Romney asserted that it was “not only the character of our country” that made the U.S. exceptional but “also the record of [its] accomplishments,” connecting the supposedly unique American qualities to seven decades of *global leadership* underpinning the peculiar *American-led order*.³ While Obama also acknowledged the achievements of this order, he stressed its *internal* sources and pointed out the *imperfect* and *unfinished* nature of the American experiment. Following his re-election, he referred to the notion as “the allegiance to an idea, articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago,” situating exceptionalism in the context of “a never-ending journey to bridge the meaning of those words [of the Declaration of Independence] with the realities of our time.”⁴ The idea that a gap exists between the universal principles enshrined in America’s founding documents and their particular realizations is hardly new; however, the widespread prevalence of exceptionalism in the political discourse was a novel phenomenon. In fact, as James Ceaser observed in 2012, up until that point, “few outside the academic world ever encountered the term ‘exceptionalism’”⁵ – which leads to the

<https://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2011/10/07/text-of-mitt-romneys-speech-on-foreign-policy-at-the-citadel/>. John McCain, Chris Christie and Marco Rubio all referred to “exceptionalism” or the U.S. being “exceptional” in their 2012 RNC speeches: <https://www.politico.com/story/2012/08/john-mccain-rnc-speech-transcript-080399>; <https://www.npr.org/2012/08/28/160213518/transcript-gov-chris-christies-convention-speech>; <https://www.npr.org/2012/08/30/160355509/transcript-sen-marco-rubios-convention-speech>. See also: Richard Cohen, “The Myth of American Exceptionalism,” *The Washington Post*, May 9, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the_myth_of_american_exceptionalism/2011/05/09/AF2rm0bG_story.html; Jason A. Edwards, “Contemporary conservative constructions of American exceptionalism,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1(2) (2011), pp. 40-54.

³ Mitt Romney, “Transcript: Mitt Romney Remarks at Virginia Military Institute,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/09/us/politics/mitt-romney-remarks-at-virginia-military-institute.html>.

⁴ Barack Obama, *Second Inaugural Address*, January 21, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama>. See also: Scott Wilson, “Obama, Romney differ on U.S. exceptionalism,” *The Washington Post*, September 26, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/decision2012/obama-romney-differ-on-us-exceptionalism/2012/09/26/23a4bcce-07e9-11e2-afff-d6c7f20a83bf_story.html.

⁵ James W. Ceaser, “The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism,” *American Political Thought* 1(1) (Spring 2012), p. 4.

puzzle about how this concept, used by scholars, found its way into mainstream political rhetoric.

Setting up the Puzzle

In parallel with these political developments, a growing scholarly literature has also been examining the origins and the meaning of American exceptionalism. In fact, even before Obama and Romney began to debate its specific content, the *foreign policy* aspect had become a prominent association connected to the term in the post-Cold War era.⁶ Exceptionalism has been described as an “ideology” of American foreign policy;⁷ as a “foundational fiction of ‘America’s’ coming into being, involving a ‘disavowal, displacement, exclusion, and cultural contestation’ in the colonial encounters between America and its others,”⁸ or as a “fantasy” related to the external behavior of the United States.⁹ Several studies characterize exceptionalism as a set of beliefs that create, construct, (re-)define, and reproduce a particular foreign policy identity,¹⁰ while others view it as a discourse that “provides a cultural mechanism for legitimating foreign policy decisions and practices that the United States would

⁶ Perhaps Stanley Hoffmann was the first in the late 1960s who explicitly used the word “exceptionalism” in relation to a specific set of beliefs connected to America’s peculiar foreign policy doctrine. However, it only began to appear more regularly in the foreign-policy literature from the 1980s, and it was the post-Cold War period when the term started to refer *primarily* to foreign policy.

⁷ Robert R. Tomes, “American Exceptionalism in the Twenty-First Century,” *Survival* 56(1) (Feb-Mar. 2014), pp. 27-50. See also: Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁸ Meghana V. Nayak and Christopher Malone, “American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism: A Critical Rethinking of US Hegemony,” *International Studies Review* 11(2) (Jun. 2009), p. 260.

⁹ Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. 1-13.

¹⁰ Trevor B. McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: US Foreign Policy since 1974* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Walter L. Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Peter S. Onuf, “American Exceptionalism and National Identity,” *American Political Thought* 1(1) (Spring 2012), pp. 77-100; Hilde Eliassen Restad, *American Exceptionalism: An Idea that Made a Nation and Remade the World* (London: Routledge, 2015).

normally condemn in other countries.”¹¹ Considering the emphasis on the *unchanged* and *permanent* nature of exceptionalism in many of these contributions, this recent proliferation of analyses in foreign policy terms leads to my initial puzzle: what explains the rising interest in exceptionalism in both scholarly and political discourse, and how has this *specific term* become so ubiquitous in the context of America’s *foreign relations* for scholars and practitioners alike? Why foreign policy and why at this point of time?

Motivated by these initial questions, this dissertation aims to examine *how the term “American exceptionalism” has been used since its first recorded appearance*. The term itself was born in a relatively marginal debate within American Communism in the 1920s, centered on the problem whether the general laws of Marxism were applicable to the United States, and, if so, what explained the underdevelopment of socialism and communism in America. While this starting point is sometimes noted in the literature, it is less explored how the notion traveled from the marginal discourses of American Marxism to mainstream U.S. politics and foreign policy.¹² On the contrary, in accordance with the assumption that exceptionalism forms a part of an omnipresent belief system that has continuously defined how Americans view their relationship to the world throughout history, it is often claimed that exceptionalism “predated the creation of a summarizing term,” arguing that the concept pre-existed separately from the label.¹³ The argument to be outlined here does not deny that the *idea* goes back to the very origins of the American nation: it is certainly true that *some* of the ideational elements that are usually associated with exceptionalism can be traced back to the founding of the United States, or even to earlier times such as the Puritan roots in the colonial era. However, my approach

¹¹ David Hughes, “Unmaking an exception: A critical genealogy of US exceptionalism,” *Review of International Studies* 41(3) (Jul. 2015), p. 528. See also: Michael Ignatieff, ed., *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹² The Communist origin is discussed in: Terrence McCoy, “How Joseph Stalin Invented ‘American Exceptionalism,’” *The Atlantic*, Mar. 15, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/03/how-joseph-stalin-invented-american-exceptionalism/254534>. See also: Ceaser, “The Origin and Character of American Exceptionalism,” p. 8; Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 28.

¹³ Byron Shafer is quoted in: Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 47.

differs from the above-mentioned analyses in the sense that it focuses on the use of the *term* not just the idea, hence it problematizes *what* was described as exceptionalism at different points of time. Then, instead of fixing a predetermined meaning to the concept, it discerns its content from its usage. In this way, exceptionalism is seen here as one of those “keywords” of American politics that – in Daniel Rodgers’s terms – “inspire, persuade, enrage, mobilize” in a process of continuous contestation.¹⁴

This mode of investigation can supplement existing research on exceptionalism by focusing on those important shifts in the use of the term that set the course for future discourses and actions with long-lasting consequences. An analysis that centers on *what* was described as exceptionalism can be justified through the theoretical-methodological considerations that orient this research. First, a major assumption here is that *choices of words matter*, insofar as examining the use of certain keywords and terms can highlight phenomena that are hidden from other methodological approaches. Second, by fixing the term (but not the meaning or the use of the term), we can avoid the pitfalls of a free-floating analysis in which exceptionalism can arbitrarily refer to a set of ideas with neither the form nor the content of the concept is stable. Third, from a more practical point of view, this mode of analysis allows me to delimit the range of discourses under analysis, while it can also contribute in important ways to the already-existing findings about American exceptionalism. Accordingly, my goal is to analyze the various contexts of the occurrences of the term, to take note of the innovations in the discourse, and to examine how this specific terminology transformed from one context to another, while serving certain functions in a scholarly, intellectual, or political agenda.

¹⁴ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 4. See also his contributions: “Exceptionalism,” in: *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past*, eds. Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 21-40; and “American Exceptionalism Revisited,” *Raritan* 24(2) (Fall 2004), pp. 21-47.

The rest of this Introduction proceeds as follows. First, I discuss *what* the object of my analysis is. A brief overview of the exceptionalism literature enables me to elaborate on how my research differs from existing approaches by highlighting the theoretical-methodological assumptions behind the analysis and by refining the questions that my dissertation aims to answer. Second, I introduce the *analytical framework* which helps to locate relevant discourses and sets the context in which arguments of American exceptionalism were articulated. Even though exceptionalism is understood from its use, it still inherently needs to contain references to *exception* and *rule*. Furthermore, the changes of its meanings and understandings are connected to times of *crises*. Third, I present *how* I conduct my investigation: following Stefano Guzzini's work on the post-Cold War return of geopolitics, I suggest a way to trace the exceptionalism discourse while taking the multilayered and historical nature of its development into account.¹⁵ Finally, I move to the organization of the analysis by outlining the order of the chapters and noting issues related to periodization.

The Object of Analysis: Exceptionalism as a Keyword

A brief review of the literature allows me to pinpoint more precisely *what* is under examination and *where* to look for "exceptionalism." While the term was first invoked with reference to supposedly *objective* differences that made the United States an outlier in the world, "exempt from the very social-historical dynamics governing all other nations;"¹⁶ more recently, it has emerged as a *subjective* category related to the *belief* in American distinctiveness in a wide array of fields, but, most prominently, in foreign policy. By analyzing the very *use* of

¹⁵ Stefano Guzzini, ed., *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe? Social Mechanisms and Foreign Policy Identity Crises* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Rodgers, "American Exceptionalism Revisited," p. 25.

exceptionalism, of course, this work falls into the latter category as it is beyond the scope of the research to adjudicate “objective” claims about America’s outlier status (or even to decide whether it is meaningful to discuss exceptionality in this sense in the first place).¹⁷ Nevertheless, *debates* about the so-called objective references to exceptions and exemptions *are* part of the analysis because this was precisely the subject of the initial contestations within American Communism, whereas Marxist (and ex-Marxist) scholars continued to use this sense of the term in their works.

Within the subjective approach, as was mentioned above, a major group of authors treats exceptionalism as a relatively permanent feature of U.S. foreign policy, discerning its content from the philosophical or religious roots of the founding of the American nation, or even from earlier periods. Two major variants of this argument exist: there can be either a single exceptionalist tradition, continuously influencing American foreign policy behavior, or the discourse can be understood to be driven by competing exceptionalisms, often broken into a dichotomy between “good” and “bad” types. The “good” type is often described as multilateralist, internationalist, or exemplarist (setting an *example* to the world but not intervening directly in the affairs of other nations), while the “bad” is characterized by unilateralist, exemptionalist (*exempting* the U.S. from international norms and rules) or missionary impulses.¹⁸ From this, cyclical explanations arise as a result of the ongoing

¹⁷ For empirical analyses of exceptionalism in U.S. foreign policy from a positivist research agenda, see: Joseph Lepgold and Timothy McKeown, “Is American Foreign Policy Exceptional? An Empirical Analysis,” *Political Science Quarterly* 110(3) (Autumn 1995), pp. 369-384; Stephen M. Walt, “The Myth of American Exceptionalism,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/the-myth-of-american-exceptionalism/>; David P. Forsythe and Patrice C. McMahon, *American Exceptionalism Reconsidered: U.S. Foreign Policy, Human Rights, and World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁸ See, for example, Daniel Deudney and Jeffrey Meiser, “American Exceptionalism,” in: Mick Cox and Douglas Stokes, eds., *U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 21-39. Harold Koh claims that “American exceptionalism has both good and bad faces, and we should acutely be aware of both.” Harold Hongju Koh, “On American exceptionalism,” *Stanford Law Review* 55(5) (May 2003), p. 1494. Peter Onuf writes that “[d]ueling exceptionalisms [a liberal and a conservative one] define each other.” Onuf, “American Exceptionalism and National Identity,” p. 82. See also: Hughes, “Unmaking the exception,” pp. 531-532.

contestation between the two forms: Stanley Hoffmann, who was among the first ones to use “exceptionalism” in the foreign-policy context, wrote about pendulum-swings between “quietism” and “activism,” both understood as a manifestation of exceptionalist beliefs.¹⁹ Others claim that the “good” form had characterized American foreign policy up until a certain period (usually until the late 19th century or the world wars), whereas, since then, the “bad,” more interventionist version has become dominant.²⁰ However, as Hilde Restad convincingly shows, there are problems with the dichotomous interpretations, not the least because proponents of the cyclic theory themselves cannot agree about the durations of these cycles; and because nineteenth-century continental expansionism can hardly be considered as an “isolationist” understanding of American foreign policy.²¹ Restad rather argues that a single exceptionalist tradition leads to a continuous “unilateralist internationalism” in foreign policy outcome. At the same time, I can highlight some very real shifts and contestations within these larger continuities by identifying through what changes the *expression* itself has become part of the language of foreign policy.²²

Whether it is the single-tradition or the competing versions interpretation of exceptionalism, these approaches stress the permanent presence of this notion in the belief systems connected

¹⁹ Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver's Troubles, or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), pp. 95; 190-208; see also his *Primacy or World Order: American Foreign Policy since the Cold War* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978). See also: Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), pp. 23-48; Geir Lundestad, “Uniqueness and pendulum swing in US foreign policy,” *International Affairs* 62(3) (Summer 1986), pp. 405-421. For more on cyclical theories, see the discussion in Chapter 4, incl. fn. 347.

²⁰ Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *The Imperial Temptation: The New World Order and America's Purpose* (New York: Council of Foreign Relations, 1992); Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

²¹ Hilde Eliassen Restad, “Old Paradigms Die Hard in Political Science: US Foreign Policy and American Exceptionalism,” *American Political Thought* 1(1) (Spring 2012), pp. 62-68; Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 56-84.

²² This is not to say that Restad denies that contestations happen, she only argues that a dominant tradition consistently emerges victoriously from these debates (see pp. 79-83 in her *American Exceptionalism*). Still, it can be important to see how the language of exceptionalism was contested *within* the framework of this dominant tradition, while also focusing on those periods of disturbances when these outcomes were far from assured either among intellectuals or even among policymakers.

to U.S. foreign policy. However, David Hughes argues that such narratives of exceptionalism often fall into the problem of “reading history backwards,”²³ as they reinforce an ahistorical and timeless interpretation of the American self-view. Hughes proposes instead an understanding that posits exceptionalism as “a discourse *produced* by the ‘impressive increase’ in US power” beginning after 1945.²⁴ At the same time, focusing only on power does not explain the variations within different components of exceptionalism when the term *did* arise, and it also leaves unanswered the question why the expression has changed its meaning over time. Moreover, as my investigation will show, contrary to the assumption that exceptionalism is the manifestation of the *increase* of U.S. power, the discourse has in fact re-intensified in periods when U.S. omnipotence was *questioned*. Indeed, exceptionalism gained strength in the mid-1970s, while the term only permanently entered politicians’ vocabulary around 2008 – in both periods, American power was widely believed to be in decline instead of in ascendance. Therefore, my analysis needs to look beyond power-based explanations to explore the emergence and re-emergence of this term.

The approach taken in this dissertation substantively differ from the literature presented above in the sense that the main starting point for the analysis is the evolution of the *term* following its appearance in Marxist terminology. In this regard, my aims are more modest as I do not outline a full intellectual history of the ideas connected to exceptionalism. Instead, I follow the “keyword” method propagated by Rodgers that rests on the presupposition that the *use* of certain political words is itself a form of political action. As Rodgers shows, it matters how certain words “were employed and for what ends, how they rose in power, withered, and collapsed, how they were invented, stolen for other ends, remade, abandoned.”²⁵ To this, we can also add the question what these words *do*: what sort of action is embodied in the utterance

²³ Hughes, “Unmaking the exception,” pp. 536-537.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 534. (Emphasis in the original.)

²⁵ Rodgers, *Contested Truths*, p. 3.

of a term, and, in a structural sense, how words themselves enable or delimit possible political consequences.

Specifically, I go back to the first recorded use of the label “American exceptionalism” and explore how its use has changed since its initial appearance in 1920s Communist discourse. However, this does not imply that the idea of exceptionalism lacks a rich history going back to earlier centuries. As several authors has shown, Puritan origins and other religious beliefs, including nineteenth-century ideas on “Manifest Destiny,” indeed form an important part of the intellectual history of American exceptionalism.²⁶ Nonetheless, those fall outside the scope of this analysis, except with regard to their relevance in twentieth- and twenty-first-century arguments. Indeed, an important contribution of the way I conduct my research is to problematize how the references to those very origins were employed by intellectuals at certain pivotal moments more recently. While Alexis de Tocqueville indeed used the word “exceptional” in a passage of *Democracy in America*, the term *exceptionalism* only appeared almost a century later, whereas crediting Tocqueville for the “invention” of exceptionalism is an even newer development that first arose in the late Cold War period. Certainly, Tocqueville is an important part of the *tradition* embraced in different articulations of exceptionalism, but it can also be revealing to identify how *Tocqueville* was *used* and for what purpose in later phases.²⁷

²⁶ Restad, *American Exceptionalism*; Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Jackson, Miss.: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), pp. 16-40; Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968); Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang 1995). See also the rediscovery of religious roots in Chapter 4.

²⁷ Certainly, an argument can be made that Tocqueville was looking at as much as the *similarities* between the United States and Europe as the differences. He noted about France in Part I of *Democracy in America*: “I saw an equality of conditions which, though it had not reached the extreme limits found in the United States, was daily drawing closer thereto; and that same democracy which prevailed over the societies of America seemed to me to be advancing rapidly toward power in Europe.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, edited by J. P. Mayer, translated by George Lawrence (New York: Harper&Row, 1988), p. 9. See also fn. 477 in Chapter 5.

This mode of analysis is informed by the methodological positions outlined in the works of both the so-called Cambridge School of intellectual history and the German historians studying conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) hallmarked by Reinhart Koselleck.²⁸ While the approaches of these two schools diverge in important ways, they agree on the presupposition that the meanings of key terms and concepts cannot be treated as being fixed but rather they need to be perceived as socially and historically contingent. Furthermore, the emphasis is on the political action and activity connected to these notions: that is why Quentin Skinner notes that “there can be no histories of concepts; there can only be histories of their uses in argument.”²⁹ Nevertheless, these schools recognize that histories of *concepts* are not the same as histories of *terms* or expressions; Skinner also observes that the relationship between concepts and words can be complicated. Still, he argues that “[t]he surest sign that a group or society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is that a corresponding vocabulary will be developed, a vocabulary which can then be used to pick out and discuss the concept in question with consistency.”³⁰ Furthermore, Koselleck remarks that “a word becomes a concept when the plentitude of a politico-social context of meaning and experience in and for which a word is used can be condensed into one word.”³¹

By concentrating on the appearance of certain keywords (in this case, “American exceptionalism” primarily) and the linguistic actions of key actors when using these words, the dissertation is more in line with the Cambridge School approach, especially with the way J. G. A. Pocock traced the evolution of Atlantic republican thought in his seminal work *The*

²⁸ The Cambridge School method is most prominently associated with the works of Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock. For an overview, see: Skinner, *Visions of Politics, vol. 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For an introduction about German conceptual history, see: Melvin Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). For a comparison between these two schools, see: Richter, ch. 6, pp. 124-142.

²⁹ Skinner quoted in: Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts*, p. 135.

³⁰ Skinner, *Vision of Politics: Regarding Method*, p. 160.

³¹ Reinhart Koselleck, “Begriffsgeschichte and social history,” *Economy and Society* 11(4) (1982), p. 419.

Machiavellian Moment.³² Nevertheless, the Cambridge School's focus on agential innovation can be supplemented with the German conceptual historians' awareness of the role of long-term social-historical transformations in linguistic changes, and of the importance of *collective experiences* (groups, parties, movements) vis-à-vis individual actors. Thus, I will also consider the historical-institutional contexts in which exceptionalism was articulated in distinct periods. In addition, I also follow the *Begriffsgeschichte* in its interest toward the *ideologization* and *politicization* of certain concepts, which necessarily requires the consideration of not just the history of one term but the related notions of a *semantic field*. In Koselleck's argument, an analysis needs to be conducted both *semasiologically* (finding all meanings associated with a word within a political-social vocabulary) and *onomasiologically* (identifying "all names and terms" used for the same idea or concept).³³ Then, while my research identifies the contexts in which the term "American exceptionalism" appears, it also traces related concepts and expressions (such as the "Americanization" of Marxism in the early stage or the notion of the U.S. as an "indispensable nation" in the post-Cold War period). Therefore, similarly to how Helge Jordheim and Iver Neumann examine the conceptual history of "empire" and "imperialism," I combine the methods of the Cambridge School with the German conceptual history.³⁴

In our case, I trace the key term "American exceptionalism" in a two-step analysis: an initial study of sources has located the crucial venues and actors of using the exact term, while, once these contexts are identified, a more systematic search of relevant primary documents explores the wider discourse (based on queries on "exceptionalism," "uniqueness" or other relevant keywords). These documents cover a wide array of sources containing the writings and

³² J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). In Pocock's work, the central words were "virtue," "fortune" and "corruption." See also: pp. 163 and 168-169 in Chapter 4.

³³ Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts*, p. 11.

³⁴ Helge Jordheim and Iver Neumann, "Empire, imperialism, and conceptual history," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 14(2) (Apr. 2011), pp. 153-185.

utterances of scholars, intellectuals, policymakers, and individuals moving between these roles. Newspaper articles, journals, books, speeches, and occasionally even manuscripts and personal notes are considered, because the point of interest is exactly how certain ideas and expressions in the discourse enter from one context (and genre) to another. In this way, my analysis differs from the substantial part of the literature that infers exceptionalism from official (and, most importantly, presidential) statements.³⁵ While building on the results of that work, my analysis looks beyond the official pronouncements of politicians and government representatives in order to unpack the intellectual history under investigation. Consequently, the object of analysis is the discourse itself as the dissertation does not attempt to explain policy outcomes.³⁶

Table 1 lists the most important sources of the different periods.

Table 1. Publications that are used as primary sources during the time periods of the chapters.

	1919-29	1929-41	1941-60	1960-79	1979-91	1991-2008
Daily newspapers	<i>The New York Times, The Washington Post</i>					
Weeklies/biweeklies	<i>The New Republic; The Nation; Time (+Fortune, Life); The Weekly Standard</i> (ch. 6)					
Radical/leftist discourse	<i>Daily Worker</i> <i>Workers Monthly</i> <i>The Communist</i>	<i>Daily Worker</i> <i>Revolutionary/</i> <i>Workers Age</i> <i>Modern Monthly</i> <i>New Masses</i> <i>Partisan Review</i>				
Intellectual debates		<i>Partisan Review</i> (chs. 2-5); <i>Commentary</i> (chs. 3-6); <i>Encounter</i> (chs. 3-5); <i>The Public Interest</i> (chs. 4-5)				
Foreign policy publications			<i>Foreign Affairs</i> (chs. 3-6); <i>Foreign Policy</i> (chs. 4-6); <i>The National Interest</i> (chs. 5-6)			

³⁵ See, for example, McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism* for such an analysis. See also: Jason A. Edwards, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World: President Clinton's Foreign Policy Rhetoric* (Lanhan, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), pp. 5-11.

³⁶ At the same time, policies matter insofar as they reflect the discourses under examination.

Discourses here are understood as *structures* that “organise knowledge systematically, and thus delimit what can be said and what not.”³⁷ After the word “exceptionalism” has been disentangled from its original narrow ideological understanding, it contributed to the “free-floating ideas” of certain actors who used it for the purpose of advancing intellectually and politically interwoven arguments. Thus, *agency* also comes into the picture: I examine what certain intellectuals *did* by imposing distinct though interrelated meanings on the term. In this process, of course, they also mobilized ideas stemming from different – and sometimes perhaps more deep-seated – historical traditions. Therefore, the analysis is necessarily limited in its scope; however, this can still shed light on how the use of this specific term shaped conversations about American distinctiveness or special role in the world. Furthermore, similarly to Elizabeth Borgwardt’s analysis of the development of “human rights” thinking on the planning of the post-World War II global order, this approach avoids the pitfalls of fixing meanings of a term, which – in Eric Foner’s words –would “exclud[e] ... numerous meanings that do not seem to meet the predetermined criteria.”³⁸ Then, the focus is on the shifts and innovations; however, for such an innovation to take root, it has to be accepted, perpetuated, or even contested and challenged. Consequently, the *intersubjective* construction of the discourse is under scrutiny, which is observed in the way that certain works continuously provide reference points in discussions of exceptionalism – even if their meanings are slightly (or substantially) transformed according to the perspective of the actor involved in the re-interpretation of the original idea.³⁹ Thus, instead of sharp breaks, the co-existence of different

³⁷ Ole Waever, “Identity, communities and foreign policy: discourse analysis as foreign policy theory,” in: Lene Hansen and Ole Waever, eds., *European Integration and National Identity: The Challenge of the Nordic States* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 29.

³⁸ Foner is quoted in: Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America’s vision for human rights* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 58.

³⁹ For example, it will be observed how relevant works by Max Lerner and Daniel Bell are continuously cited in the development of the exceptionalist discourse even if the aims of the invocation slightly or substantially differ from Lerner’s and Bell’s conceptions.

threads of thoughts, older beliefs and transformative innovations are noted – somewhat similarly to how Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson identify “liberal beginnings” in late 18th/early 19th century political thinking instead of seeing a clear break between republican and liberal theories.⁴⁰

From this, I can refine the questions under investigation. *First, what have been the major locations of the contestation over the term “American exceptionalism” since its appearance in Marxist literature? Second, who were the actors playing a role in the transformations of the discourse, and what were they doing by invoking the term in different contexts? Third, how was it possible that the term entered the language of politics and foreign policy, and how has it acquired its specific foreign-policy meanings amid an abundance of post-Cold War references?* Answering this set of questions requires a kind of analysis that looks beyond the foreign-policy discourse in order to understand the invocations of exceptionalism within their contexts. However, this does not mean an “anything can go” approach and the next section introduces a framework that establishes the contexts for the different articulations.

The Analytical Framework: Exception, Order, and Crisis

Although my analysis aims to discover the meaning of exceptionalism from its usage, this does not imply that certain regularities cannot be identified in the discourse. Exceptionalism inherently has to say something about both *rule* and *exception*, about both the existence of certain *universal* standards or practices and the *particular* conditions under which they may not apply fully. Indeed, as Nicola Nymalm and Johannes Plagemann argue in a recent

⁴⁰ Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson, *Liberal Beginnings: Making a Republic for the Moderns* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

theoretical contribution, the “[e]xceptionalist discourse expresses a paradoxical relationship between universality and particularity: the exceptionalist state claims particular and exclusive access to the universal good – in terms of its comprehension and the disposition to realize it beyond its own borders.”⁴¹ There is nothing new in the appreciation of this tension between universalism and particularism: in his analysis of Atlantic republicanism, Pocock notes that the main dilemma of the humanist republic was that “it attempted to realise a universality of virtue within a particular, and therefore finite and mortal, political form.”⁴² In the U.S. case, Samuel Huntington similarly identified a peculiar gap between the universal ideals of American politics and their particular institutional realizations, which is also the idea reflected in Obama’s reference to the “never-ending journey” to “bridge the meaning” of certain words with contemporary realities.⁴³

Hence, grasping the particularism-universalism dilemma is central to understanding of *any* reference to exceptionalism, and certainly to American exceptionalism given Americans’ inclination to regard their standards as universally valid. In international politics, this interplay between exception and rule is often conceived in the terms of exception and *order*: order here is understood as the patterns of activities that structure the relationship between states, thus referring to certain rules and regularities which can endow *exception* with meaning in the first place.⁴⁴ At the same time, this emphasis on the interaction between exception and rule, or

⁴¹ Nicola Nymalm and Johannes Plagemann, “Comparative Exceptionalism: Universality and Particularity in Foreign Policy Discourses,” *International Studies Review* 21(1) (Mar. 2019), p. 14. Restad also recognizes that “American exceptionalism is a narrative of peculiarity and universality.” Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 48. (Emphasis in the original.)

⁴² J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 99.

⁴³ Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981); Obama, *Second Inaugural Address*.

⁴⁴ Hedley Bull defines international order as “a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states, or international society,” which itself means that those states “conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions.” Here, Bull refers to the most basic principles as the “elementary or primary goals” such as the preservation of the system, of the self, of peace, and limiting violence. Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 8-20. (Quotes are from pp. 8 and 13.)

exception and order can take various forms. For one, exception in some cases does not obliterate the rule; on the contrary, sometimes this is exactly the exception that *proves* the rule, which confirms the logic of the regularity and the order, either by making the exception temporary (with references to ideas such as “uneven development”) or by giving the exceptional entity a distinguished position *within* the order (a veto power in the UN Security Council system or an “exceptional” great power in the post-Cold War world). In other cases, exceptionalism is evoked to *refute* or *resist* the rule (the assumed regularity in the collapse of democracies in the interwar period, or the “laws” of history and international relations connected to the “rise and fall” of great powers and the emergence of balancing coalitions can be noted here⁴⁵). Still others use exceptionalism to *strengthen* the rule by condemning others (the supposedly “exceptionalists”) for disregarding its validity, or just by announcing the “end” of the exception.⁴⁶ Those different forms can even be in play simultaneously; for instance, in the post-Cold War era, some used exceptionalism to justify a “benevolent hegemony” which creates an order dependent on the U.S. as the “exceptional” great power (proving the rule), though, at the same time, disproving the assumed laws on the eventual fall of great powers and on the instability of a unipolar order.

Those different understandings of exception and order imply different speech acts in invoking exceptionalism, which are to be examined in the dissertation. At the heart of the issue are the various forms of collective self-conceptions that relate American self-view to the country’s presumed position or duty in world history and international politics. In the study of foreign

⁴⁵ See, for example, Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁴⁶ Understanding “exceptionalism” as a “mistaken theory” has re-occurred regularly since the first such articulation in the American Communist movement; see, for example, Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise” *International Security* 17(4) (Spring 1993), pp. 5-51. The “end of exceptionalism” has also been declared from time to time, most famously by Daniel Bell in his “The end of American exceptionalism,” *The Public Interest* 41 (Fall 1975), pp. 193-224 (though Bell later reconsidered his position). For a recent argument about the “end of exceptionalism” see: Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books and Henry Holt, 2008).

policy, they are often called “national role conceptions” which are enacted under certain conditions by the leaders of a country.⁴⁷ As I will argue, exceptionalism often comes to the fore when such conceptions are contested, while the enactments of certain roles are proposed, reiterated or rejected. Indeed, in Obama’s Strasbourg response, we can see such roles: he speaks about “leadership,” the “ability to create partnerships,” he also refers to collective decisions and obligations stemming from the distinguished status of the U.S. due to its economic and military capabilities and its “core set of values.” Then, the understanding and categorization of these possible role conceptions can reveal how exceptionalism was used in distinct social-intellectual contexts, which leads us to the framework on which the analysis is grounded.

My study explores the ideas that informed intellectuals’ and policymakers’ understandings of America’s place in the world in their references to exceptionalism, and, for this, I consider how they responded to two key questions related to America’s international conduct. First, did they believe that the values and political institutions of the United States hold universal relevance, or did they rather think that those are contained in space and time? Second, did they suggest that the U.S. should be actively involved in international affairs on the basis of these very values and arrangements? Depending on the answers to these questions, their thoughts can be characterized along two dimensions: the first one makes the distinction between *universalism* and *particularism*, while the second one locates articulations between the endpoints of *activism* and *withdrawal*. Here, these categories are explored at the level of *discourses* and not the actual policies: the goal is then to explore the intellectual background of certain ideas and not necessarily how they were implemented in certain cases. The activism-withdrawal axis in this sense is close to what Hoffmann referred to as the swings between “quietist” and “activist”

⁴⁷ The original work on different role conceptions is: Kalevi J. Holsti, “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 14(3) (Sep. 1970), pp. 233-309. For an overview of role theory, see: Cameron G. Thies, *Role Theory and Foreign Policy* (2009), <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.467.8733&rep=rep1&type=pdf>. See also: Stefano Guzzini, “The framework of analysis: geopolitics meets foreign policy crises,” in: *The Return of Geopolitics*, pp. 49-52.

variants of exceptionalism (and this is not too different from the usual distinction between isolationism and interventionism), and, as was noted, this dichotomic view of American foreign policy is necessarily problematic. Still, supplementing this with the activism-particularism axis can provide a useful analytical framework that categorizes convictions and intellectual presuppositions.⁴⁸ Table 2 shows how positions can be broken down into four different categories.

Table 2. The applicability of American values abroad and foreign-policy positions.

	Universalism	Particularism
Activism	Missionary (Manifest Destiny; Democratization; interventionism; liberal internationalism)	Moral superiority; defense of U.S. values (imperialism; early neoconservatism); offensive realism
Withdrawal	Exemplarism (America as a role model)	Defensive realism; “isolationism;” “reverse exceptionalism”

Two caveats are necessary here. First, while these dimensions provide four clear analytically different positions, in reality the distinctions are often blurred, and these can instead be seen as scales (especially the activism-withdrawal axis) rather than clear-cut categories. Similarly, not every intellectual or policymaker can be categorized neatly into any of the four brackets at a particular moment, whereas intellectuals and policymakers also often change their positions over time, as will be noted. Second, the table should not be seen as a general explanatory framework of every aspect of U.S. foreign policy, but as a way to identify the background context of those beliefs and role conceptions that are relevant for exceptionalism. This helps to

⁴⁸ Indeed, Obama in his above-mentioned quote advances a clearly activist role conception of U.S. foreign policy, while others connect exceptionalism with an inherently restrained understanding of America’s global role. See: Wesley W. Widmaier, “Constructing Foreign Policy Crises: Interpretive Leadership in the Cold War and the War on Terrorism,” *International Studies Quarterly* 51(4) (Dec. 2007), pp. 782-783.

locate exceptionalist discourses but will not provide a complete explanation for the transformations of the use of the term.

The four major types can be identified as the *missionary* character; *exemplarism*; the “*isolationist*” or *defensive realist* position; and *offensive realism* combined with the argument of *moral superiority*.

UNIVERSALISM-ACTIVISM: THE MISSIONARY CHARACTER

The top-left cell in the table is usually recognized as America’s *missionary* character: indeed, if American values are universally applicable and the United States has to maintain an active posture in international politics, this inevitably leads to a foreign policy defined in terms of a global mission. This is the most familiar face of American exceptionalism, closest to what advocates of a single tradition view as *the* dominant form of exceptionalism. The messianic attitude is often characterized as the continuation of the 19th-century ideology of “Manifest Destiny,” or as the Wilsonian mission of making the world safe for an American understanding of democracy. These beliefs are sometimes justified through religious references; in other cases, they are simply based on the ideology of the greatness of American values.⁴⁹ Although a universalist-activist discourse can still favor either unilateralism or multilateralism, in much of the Cold War period (especially in its first two decades), this was manifested in a *liberal internationalist* consensus which regarded the American role as crucial in the institutional settings underpinning the Western liberal order, essentially encompassing the “free half” of the bipolar world.

⁴⁹ See Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation* for the religious sources of the mission. On Manifest Destiny, see Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*. On the democratizing mission, the seminal work is: Tony Smith, *America’s Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012). On the ideology of “greatness,” see: Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. foreign policy*, pp. 19-45; 125-170.

UNIVERSALISM-WITHDRAWAL: EXEMPLARISM

If American values are universally valid but the U.S. should refrain from intervening in the businesses of other nations when possible, it means that America should set an example as a role model to the rest of the world. This view can thus be called *exemplarism*. According to Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., this was at the core of the *original* tradition, which contained the idea that “America would redeem the world not by intervention but by example.”⁵⁰ Similarly, John Winthrop’s seventeenth-century sermon about America as a “city upon a hill” is often cited as representing an exemplarist tradition – though with Ronald Reagan’s popularization of the term, it was re-interpreted in a more activist way.⁵¹

PARTICULARISM-WITHDRAWAL: “ISOLATIONISM,” “REVERSE EXCEPTIONALISM,” REALISM⁵²

An even more restrained position is to say that the United States should not get involved in the affairs of others because it has no relevant values and approaches to offer. This is an essentially inward-looking position which can even amount to *isolationism*,⁵³ an almost complete separation from international politics. Of course, in pure form, complete withdrawal never occurs, but considering it as an extreme case can be analytically useful. However, extreme nationalists and nativists were close to this view at various points of American history. But, ironically, particularism and withdrawal can be the position of extreme anti-nationalists as well: whereas nationalists may argue for withdrawal to keep the U.S. uncontaminated from foreign

⁵⁰ Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History*, p. 89.

⁵¹ Michael Signer, “A City on a Hill,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 1 (Summer 2006), <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/1/a-city-on-a-hill/>. But for other interpretations of Winthrop’s sermon, see also: Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), pp. 7-9; Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 1-3. For more on Reagan’s use, see Chapter 5, pp. 180-181 and fn. 450-452.

⁵² Realism, of course, most commonly refers to theories of International Relations or foreign policy strategies. Here the understanding is somewhat broader as it includes certain intellectual conceptions that contain references about the kind of role that the United States needs to play in the world – often covered in the works of authors who theorize about realism in a stricter sense. These background ideas can influence articulations of exceptionalism.

⁵³ On the label of “isolationism,” see Chapter 2, fn. 184.

influences, radical anti-nationalists want to save the *world* from harmful *American* interventions. Some call this “*reverse exceptionalism*” since the United States is seen as exceptional in a negative sense.⁵⁴ On the other hand, *realists* mostly reject exceptionalist arguments as their theory is grounded on the functional similarity of actors. Furthermore, realists are skeptical about a foreign policy based on the applicability of certain (American) values, which justifies their categorization within the particularism column. At the same time, realists can be located anywhere on the activism-withdrawal axis: some, like George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau, emphasize restraint which, arguably, brings them closer to the withdrawal end.⁵⁵

PARTICULARISM-ACTIVISM: OFFENSIVE REALISM AND THE MORAL SUPERIORITY ARGUMENT

Offensive realists, however, argue for activism,⁵⁶ but this is not the only way to formulate particularist and activist positions. While realists downplay the relevance of American values, others claim that values should be the basis of an *activist* foreign policy even if these very values are *not* universally relevant. This seemingly self-contradictory statement is resolved (or, at least, presumed to be resolved) in the argument made by those who assume the *moral superiority* of American values, which, in turn, need strong defense even in a hostile world. From this, expansionism or even imperialism can easily be justified; indeed, particularism-activism was the dominant view in the interwar period, and it was revived by early neoconservatives.

⁵⁴ On “reverse exceptionalism,” see Chapter 4, fn. 358.

⁵⁵ Of course, both Kennan and Morgenthau changed their position during their career. Kennan’s original “containment” was an activist vision, but he soon became critical of American foreign policy, moving closer to “withdrawal” by the 1960s and 1970s. To a lesser extent, but Morgenthau similarly turned against activism as he criticized the Vietnam involvement. See more in Chapters 3 and 4 on their positions.

⁵⁶ See, for example, John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

The argument is not that exceptionalism is located exclusively in any of the four categories: in fact, exceptionalist statements can be made – and *were* made – along both dimensions. Instead, my analysis concentrates on the *tension* between exception and order based on these understandings, and the 2x2 matrix serves to set the context and show those background beliefs *against which* exceptionalist arguments were made. Moreover, it is the *movement* in the table that interests us, which often happens in the aftermath of situations of *crises*: in moments when settled understandings about the reach and limits of U.S. influence are in flux.

This understanding of crisis is informed by earlier theoretical works. Jutta Weldes argues that [foreign-policy] “crises are social constructions that are forged by state officials in the course of producing and reproducing state identity,” while Stefano Guzzini defines *foreign-policy identity crises* as particular events where “interpretations given to the event must be such as to make role conceptions no longer self-evident,” which induce certain discourses to arise.⁵⁷ Exceptionalism, as it turns out, is not simply a reflection of the increase of power, but arises in times of crises though my understanding of crisis will be broader in two ways. First, the experience of crisis is not necessarily (though often) connected to the unsettled nature of *foreign-policy* identity, but it can involve contested self-understandings discerned from other factors; for example, as manifested in the New Deal response to the Great Depression. Second, the construction of the crisis does not exclusively stem from state officials, but the perception of the crisis will also be identified in the intellectual discourse. Nevertheless, I share with these studies an emphasis on the constructed nature of those situations that induce shifts in collective self-understandings, enabling actors to give new meanings to concepts in flux.

⁵⁷ Jutta Weldes, “The Cultural Production of Crisis: U.S. Identity and Missiles in Cuba,” in: *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger*, eds. Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson and Raymond Duvall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 37; Guzzini, “The framework of analysis,” p. 56. See also: Widmaier, “Constructing Foreign Policy Crises,” pp. 784-785.

The movements between the different cells of the table under crises situations suggests that the table itself cannot explain the shifts in the formulations of exceptionalism, thus, in order to trace the contexts in which the tension between exception and order plays out, I also have to move beyond the two-dimensional framework. This requires a kind of analysis that can look beyond the foreign-policy discourse, take note of how ideas move between contexts, and explain how changes occur. This will be outlined in the next section.

The Discourse-Tracing of American Exceptionalism

The aim of this section is twofold: it lays out the framework of my argument and it also introduces *how* I will conduct my analysis. These two aims are essentially inseparable due to the nature of the study as the development of certain ideas and discourses is what is under scrutiny here. This part draws substantially on Guzzini's design of an interpretivist process tracing that he used for investigating the formation of geopolitical discourses; it also follows what Piki Ish-Shalom describes as *discourse-tracing* – “analyzing the process in which one kind of discourse transformed into another” – in his research on the politicization of democratic peace theory.⁵⁸ Such an analysis can highlight how exceptionalism has arisen at distinct discursive levels and how the interaction between these levels shaped the terms under which specific American self-understandings were articulated. Therefore, considering its various contexts, the exceptionalist discourse has a depth that cannot be traced in a linear process: “[r]ather than assuming one single process line that various factors punctuate, we might look

⁵⁸ Guzzini, “The framework of analysis,” pp. 58-61; Stefano Guzzini, “Social mechanisms as micro-dynamics in constructivist analysis,” in: *The Return of Geopolitics*, pp. 252-264; Piki Ish-Shalom, “Theory as a Hermeneutical Mechanism: The Democratic-Peace Thesis and the Politics of Democratization,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12(4) (Dec. 2006), pp. 566-567.

for a series of layers that can each be considered as having a path-dependent – that is, autonomous – process line of its own.”⁵⁹ Moreover, as Ish-Shalom notes, while ideas and theories influence social reality, reality also alters the formulation of these very ideas and theories, which means that ideas travel multiple ways: in our case, between the scholarly, intellectual and political spheres where the term exceptionalism and similar arguments were brought up.⁶⁰ This mode of analysis can contribute to the existing understandings of exceptionalism by pointing out what actors aimed to achieve by invoking the notion, and by discovering the unintended ramifications that perpetuated the use of this discursive frame.

Consequently, the goal is to understand how the discourse moves between the different layers, which, similarly to Guzzini’s case, requires an *interpretivist, historical, multilayered* analysis. I follow an *interpretivist* approach as I focus on the constitutive processes which have allowed certain discourses to emerge and transform. Therefore, this type of analysis – given the nature of the development of ideas themselves as understood by the Cambridge School or the German conceptual historians – necessarily uncovers processes that are *contingent* and *indeterminate*, leading to questions and arguments formulated on the basis of a “how possible” type of causation.⁶¹ Furthermore, these discourses are embedded in certain understandings of U.S. and international history, whereas sequencing also matters (the particular order in which exceptionalist arguments evolve from one stage to another), which demands a *historical* analysis. In addition, a *multilayered* discourse-tracing is outlined in order to pursue the various layers in which exceptionalism is manifested. A multilayered analysis can track different threads of ideational structures in parallel, observing how these emerge, intertwine with each other, or become discontinued. In this way, I can look beyond the foreign-policy associations

⁵⁹ Guzzini, “Social mechanisms as micro-dynamics,” p. 257.

⁶⁰ Ish-Shalom, “Theory as a Hermeneutical Mechanism,” pp. 567, 574-575.

⁶¹ On this type of causality as contrasted with “classical Humean” causality, see: Guzzini, “The framework of analysis,” pp. 52, 258; on mechanisms that are “understood as contingent or indeterminate,” see: Stefano Guzzini, “Securitization as a causal mechanism,” *Security Dialogue* 42(4-5) (2011), pp. 332-337.

of the term and examine the back and forth movement of ideas between the academic and political spheres, as well as within the important boundary locations between those where intellectuals articulate their beliefs with the clear intention of influencing policy-making. Hence, instead of accepting exceptionalism as a given, I can uncover how the term has *worked* in different contexts.⁶²

The review of the discourse reveals five important layers that are relevant here: *international structure* (including events with world-historical relevance); the *(foreign) policy discourse*; a marginal *radical* discourse which later turns into broader *intellectual* discussions; *ideational background beliefs*; and *political struggles* related to articulations of exceptionalism at different layers.

International structure. The intersubjective constitution of the exceptionalist discourse means that an important goal of the analysis is to uncover the conditions under which innovations are accepted and perpetuated. I argue that these often happen in periods of “unsettled times” when established meanings are questioned, opening up relevant concepts for reinterpretation.⁶³ These understandings of crises are frequently connected to perceptions about large-scale changes in the structures of international politics or economics. Indeed, it will be seen how new meanings can emerge in the aftermath of major international wars and substantial economic downturns. Here, of course, crisis is more than just the external event; it is the *experience* and *interpretation* of crisis periods that matter. These interpretations translate

⁶² Hixson notes that “‘American exceptionalism’ has become something of a reflexive cliché, often employed under the assumption that we know what it means and thus do not fully explore how the concept works within culture.” Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy*, p. 320, n. 22. However, unfortunately, he does not elaborate on this either.

⁶³ The distinction between “settled” and “unsettled” cultural periods is made in: Ann Swindler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51(2) (Apr. 1986), pp. 273-286. See also: Ira Katznelson, “Periodization and Preferences: Reflections on purposive action in comparative historical social science,” in: *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, eds. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 281-284.

into discourses in other layers of analysis; they especially – but not exclusively – have an impact at the foreign-policy level.

(Foreign) policy discourses. While the original puzzle involved the appearance of exceptionalism in discourses related to *foreign* policy, the very essence of exceptionalism suggests a deep interrelation between domestic and international factors. Thus, from the perspective of exceptionalism, domestic and foreign policies are always intertwined, which requires that they should not be treated separately in the analysis. Indeed, for instance, policy positions related to trade and immigration are often influenced by domestic political considerations, but, at the same time, also reflect those assumptions on universalism and particularism that form the very basis of the dilemma of exceptionalism. Consequently, the 2x2 matrix of Table 2 can help to identify the relevant positions in policy discourses, which will be explored in each chapter to understand the context of exceptionalist formulations. This framework can shed light on certain developments that are hidden from other approaches: for example, the transformation of neoconservatism from a more particularistic tradition under the peculiar conditions of the Cold War to its universalist ambition in the post-Cold War world is often lost in analyses. Still, as was noted, the matrix itself cannot explain fully the underlying transformations, just as the policy discourses themselves do not contain all aspects of the invocations of the term. For this reason, I have to examine the other discursive layers too.

Radical and intellectual discourses. “American exceptionalism” as an expression appeared in a relatively marginal discourse within the American Communist Party. My goal is to unearth the ways the term entered mainstream political discussions, which is – in part – also the story how a group of leftist intellectuals left behind their ideological presuppositions but used some available ideas and linguistic constructs for the articulation of their changed positions and political programs. In the original invocation, “exceptionalism” was understood as a supposedly *objective* category: arising from Werner Sombart’s observation about the

distinctive underdevelopment of the American socialist movement, the concept first referred to the absence – or, at least, weakness – of a socialist or social democratic party and developmental path in America.⁶⁴ However, influenced by perception of “crises” and ongoing developments in other layers of the discourse, some intellectuals re-interpreted the term, understanding it in a more subjective way, and this was, in turn, picked up by political actors.

Ideational background and political struggles. The focus on radical and intellectual discourses should not mean that political concerns are neglected. In fact, political struggles have been part of the formulation of the discourse from the very beginning; the original debate among Communists was just as much about parallel power struggles in the Soviet and American party leadership as it was grounded on theoretical differences. Exceptionalism has often been used to *set boundaries* between groups and to *stigmatize political opponents*. In this sense, the major difference between the early Communist references and the contemporary conservative usage is that while, originally, some Communist leaders were condemned for *believing* in a unique American developmental path, today’s conservatives accuse liberals of *not* believing in exceptional U.S. qualities. At the same time, structures of deeply-held *ideational background beliefs* have also influenced how the discourse has evolved. These ideological, racial, etc. understandings have propelled processes that can be seen as “ideational path dependencies” in the sense that the set-up of ideational structures at a particular moment of time depends on the historical trajectory of the discourses containing the relevant ideas.⁶⁵ Consequently, my goal is to identify *critical junctures* of the discursive development, which are also connected to perceptions of crises.

⁶⁴ Werner Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*, translated by Patricia M. Hocking and C. T. Husbands. (London: Macmillan, 1976).

⁶⁵ On this understanding of “ideational path dependence,” see: Guzzini, “The framework of analysis,” p. 61.

From this, what remains to be discussed is how to locate these critical junctures and recognize different periods in the development of the discourse.

The Way Forward: Periodization and the Chapters

The analytical imposition of starting points and breaks between periods is necessarily somewhat arbitrary.⁶⁶ This is certainly inescapable when we talk about ideational history. Indeed, it is easy to find precursors to certain discursive changes in earlier periods, while other beliefs do not become obsolete and die out immediately; thus, sharp breaks rarely happen in this sense. Nevertheless, the periodization of the exceptionalist discourse helps me in structuring the argument (even if this will not be used as a strict imposition as some references will be made to sources outside the examined periods), whereas most of the “turning points” are quite straightforward and well-established in American politics. Thus, these turning points come from fundamental shifts in U.S. self-perceptions due to wars (1918-19; 1941); significant economic downturns (1929; 2008-09); or substantial changes in the structure of international politics (1979-80; 1989-91).⁶⁷ The exact starting point of the crisis of the mid-1960s is less clear in this regard; sometimes it is originated either in 1963 (John F. Kennedy’s assassination),

⁶⁶ On periodization, see: Katznelson, “Periodization and Preferences,” pp. 274-281; Ira Katznelson, “Working-Class Formation and American Exceptionalism, Yet Again,” in: *American Exceptionalism? US Working-Class Formation in an International Context*, eds. Rick Halpern and Jonathan Morris (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 45-51. In his book *Age of Fracture*, Daniel Rodgers argues against “the journalists’ and popular historians’ propensity to punctuate by decades” and he rather analyzes ideational changes of the last quarter of the twentieth century in one overarching framework. There is certainly a danger of simplification when the characters of different decades are contrasted, but the timespans between one and two decades seem to be appropriate for the analysis of exceptionalism. Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 3.

⁶⁷ These categories, of course, are not independent of each other: World War II also brought about significant structural changes, while the causes of the perceived changes of 1979-80 were, partly, economic.

in 1964 (the Gulf of Tonkin resolution) or even in the events of 1968.⁶⁸ 1960 is chosen here because of the significant symbolic delineation between the “fifties” and the “sixties” and because the analysis of Daniel Bell’s *The end of ideology* – subtitled *On the exhaustion of political ideas in the fifties* – sets the stage, somewhat paradoxically, for our analysis of the upheavals of the *sixties*.⁶⁹

The chapters aim to establish what actors *do* by invoking exceptionalism and how their articulations are structured by existing discourses during distinct time periods. Each chapter zooms in on the use of exceptionalism in the given time-period: with the help of the 2x2 matrix of Table 2, I highlight the political context of the debates of the era, then analyze more closely the intellectual background of the relevant formulations, and examine the acts embodied in the very articulations themselves. This method allows me to ascertain how the logics of exception and order work under various perceptions of crises (see Table 3). In addition, I also explore *who* uses exceptionalism with relation to *whom*: at least originally, the reference object was not the self but some – mostly political – other, i.e. those who referred to exceptionalism derided this concept or theory as a mistaken belief held by their intra-party or ideological rivals. At a later stage, exceptionalism has become self-referential, either because those who perpetuated the discourse accepted and embraced the ambiguities following from it, or because they simplified and disregarded the ambiguity – just like Ish-Shalom observes in the case of the simplification of scholarly terms and theories into public conventions when “a loss of the caution and sense of criticism that is built into academic discourse and conduct” occurs.⁷⁰ The inherent tension between universalism and particularism necessarily endows exceptionalist

⁶⁸ In a recent analysis, Kevin Kruse and Julian Zelizer originate current “fault lines” in American politics in 1974. Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

⁶⁹ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1960])

⁷⁰ Ish-Shalom, “Theory as a Hermeneutical Mechanism,” p. 572. See also Jordheim and Neumann, “Empire, imperialism, and conceptual history,” pp. 169-172 on the return of “empire” as a self-referential concept.

discourses with some sort of ambiguity; however, during the politicization of the concept at a later stage, this ambiguous nature was de-emphasized in order to mobilize the discourse for a particular political agenda.

From this, the dissertation proceeds as follows. In *Chapter 1*, the analysis starts with the Communist origins of American exceptionalism in the 1920s. As was mentioned previously, while the ideas associated with the exceptionalist label go much further back in American history than this, the term “American exceptionalism” was first used in relation to the intra-Communist debates of the late 1920s, and the problematic relationship between exception and order was first explicitly articulated in this context. Indeed, a 1950 article still listed “exceptionalism” as a “Russian borrowing,” which, of course, etymologically does not mean that the English word is taken from Russian, but it still emerged from discussions in Moscow and followed the terminology of the Soviet Communist Party.⁷¹ Many of the debates on exceptionalism mentioned in Chapter 1 refer to a “future crisis;” in turn, *Chapter 2* examines the radical-leftist discourse once this crisis finally struck American capitalism. In fact, the whole period examined in this chapter can be conceived as “unsettled times” when exceptionalism, perhaps surprisingly, did not disappear, but instead gained new meanings as former radicals gradually became disillusioned with Communism. Amid a growing international crisis, by the end of this era, America’s uniqueness was connected to its resistance to the rising tide of dictatorships and to a newly acquired sense of international responsibility. *Chapter 3* continues this line of thought as the scopes of America’s international involvement were rapidly extended following Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entry to World War II. From this, exceptionalism functioned as a legitimation of the post-war U.S.-led international order,

⁷¹ Albert Parry, “On ‘Aesopian’ Language and Borrowings from Russian,” *American Speech* 25(3) (Oct. 1950), p. 193.

attempting to resolve the tensions between newly-embraced universalist principles and the particularist institutional framework under a peculiarly *realist* recognition of ambiguities.

Chapter 4 examines the exceptionalist discourse during the crisis of the post-war order when the existence of the exception was briefly questioned, but ultimately got reaffirmed. This is also the period of the rise of neoconservatism, and the beginning of appropriation of certain ideas that, in the end, contributed to the loss of ambiguity originally contained in the understanding of exceptionalism. *Chapter 5*'s crisis, the so-called "Second Cold War" is a telling example of the constructed nature of these unsettled periods. Then, the reinvocation of exceptionalism happened in the context of re-asserting national confidence and a rise of neoconservative and neoliberal policies under the Reagan administration. With the collapse of bipolarity, *Chapter 6* moves toward the unipolar order when even the success of the Cold War can be seen as a crisis if we understand it in relation to the sudden rise of uncertainties regarding established roles and meanings. While various actors invoked exceptionalism in this era, in the end, a new generation of neoconservatives mobilized the concept in support of a particular foreign-policy agenda following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. However, a new sense of crisis, connected to the global financial downturn and the unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, questioned the existence of the exception in this regard. Thus, the *Conclusion* of the dissertation summarizes the findings while also providing an outlook to the shifts in the discourse happening under Obama's and Donald Trump's presidency.

Time period	Who uses exceptionalism	Reference of discourse	Crisis	Logic of order/rule	Logic of exception	What invoking exceptionalism <i>does</i>
1919-29	CPUSA / Stalinist faction	Lovestone-Pepper faction of CPUSA	Future crisis	Marxist theory; capitalist development; timing of revolution	Uneven development (Leninism)	Stigmatize political opponents; Justifies backward state of US Communism
1929-41	CPUSA; anti-Stalinist left	Anti-Stalinists; liberals	Great Depression	Rise of dictatorial regimes	Experimentation (New Deal); democracy	Americanizes leftist discourse; Appreciates US conditions during crisis
1941-60	Former leftists; Cold War liberals	Self	WWII; early Cold War	Post-war economic, political order	Responsibility; US leadership; civilizational duty	Maintains US leadership; Justifies international engagements
1960-79	Former Old Left; foreign policy elites	-	Vietnam War; crisis of post-war order	Post-war order (in crisis); rise and fall of great powers	Exception questioned; resisting rise and fall	Questions exception; redefines US role; reasserts civil religion
1980-91	Scholars; Foreign policy writers	Reagan adm; neoconservatives	“Second Cold War”	Rise and fall of great powers; Rise of the state	Resisting decline; anti-Communism; anti-statism	Reasserts national confidence and Cold War role; justifies neoliberal economic policies
1991-2008	Scholars; foreign policy writers; neoconservatives; Critics of G. W. Bush foreign policy; politicians	Neoconservatives; G. W. Bush adm; self	End of the Cold War; 9/11	Unipolar order (“new world order,” “liberal order,” “American order”)	Responsibility; US leadership; Hegemony; Exemption	Highlights / questions / reasserts hegemony; Regenerates national community by setting boundaries
2008-	Scholars; Politicians; foreign policy intellectuals	Right-wing politics; US foreign policy; self	Global financial crisis; Iraq/Afghan wars	Unipolar order (in crisis)	US leadership despite crisis; Exception questioned	Reasserts hegemony? Stigmatizes political opponents?

Table 3. Logics of crisis, exception, and order.

Chapter 1 –

The Communist Origins of American Exceptionalism (1919-29)

“Put me on a pedestal and I’ll only disappoint you
Tell me I’m exceptional I promise to exploit you”⁷²

As foreshadowed in the Introduction, our story begins in the immediate aftermath of World War I; in the period when the United States seemingly withdrew from international commitments by declining to enter the League of Nations, and when – influenced by events happening in Europe, especially in Russia – the Communist Party was formed in America. While one could go back in history endlessly in searching for “origins,” the choice of the starting point is not entirely arbitrary. In fact, it can be justified in two ways. First, World War I embodied the crucial moment when the United States entered European power politics, and – as a result of the protracted conflict – the world’s economic and political center irrevocably moved westward from one side of the Atlantic to the other. Notwithstanding America’s choice to limit its interference with European affairs in the next two decades – though, as we see below, it did not amount to full isolation, – it *did* become a great, even leading, power with global influence. Second, the term “American exceptionalism” arises from the discourse of American Communism in this period, which warrants a closer examination of the first decade of the U.S. Communist movement. Moreover, this chapter shows that the two are not completely unrelated, but – in line with the general argument previously outlined – exceptionalism was articulated in the context of a response to a crisis (World War I and the Russian Revolution in this case) while reflecting the tension between universality and

⁷² Courtney Barnett, “Pedestrian at Best,” *Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit*, Milk! Records, 2015.

particularity. The main point, of course, is not that the interpretation of the crisis led *directly* to the debate about exceptionalism among Communists; this would not do justice to the contingencies and agential innovations of the process. Rather, faithful to the outlined framework of discourse-tracing, the chapter uncovers the process which enabled this discourse to emerge, while also highlighting the contestations over interpretations of events, and the role of deeply-held background beliefs and unlikely ideological influences that affected how the discourse evolved.

Therefore, the purpose of the chapter is also twofold, corresponding to the two ways of justifying the starting point. First, it introduces the context by highlighting the move from Wilsonian universalism to Republican particularism in American foreign policy at the beginning of the 1920s. This presentation challenges the account of an “isolationist turn,” but also supplements those approaches that stress the continuities in American foreign policy. Partly drawing from earlier assumptions of Anglo-Saxon superiority and racialized understandings of nationality, the interpretation of the post-war crisis effectuated a shift toward more restrictive discourses and policies, especially regarding trade, immigration, and the securitization of the “danger” of the radicalism in the left. This undoubtedly more particularistic vision impacted the view of America’s role in the world; at the same time, Marxism provided a universalistic understanding of global economic tendencies. This leads to the second purpose: the chapter traces the origins of the idea of exceptionalism *within the Communist discourse*, while connecting it to unlikely Russian influences; to the theory of “uneven development” which paved the way for “exceptions” to arise; and to the factional struggle within Communism in the 1920s which provided the background of the discussions. Thus, the supposedly universal “laws” of Marxism played the role of order, while the logic of exception was also internal to the Marxist(-Leninist) discourse, even if the term itself arose as an accusation against political opponents. The interpretation of a crisis was also important in

the Communist debate, though in this special case, it referred to a *future crisis*; indeed, while the fight between opposing factions in American Communism is usually – and not without basis – seen as a mere power struggle, different views on the timing of a coming crisis of American capitalism and a possible Communist revolution were central to this antagonism. Moreover, while “exceptionalism” in this case highlighted the tension between universal Marxist laws and American realities, perhaps inadvertently, it also brought to attention another exceptionalism, namely, Russia’s distinguished role, since not just the Soviet Communist Party, but the whole Comintern was consolidated under Stalin’s control. This fact will provide a line of argument for those who use the exceptionalist discourse to turn against Soviet domination within the American left, but this will happen only after the “future crisis,” the Great Depression, hits the United States and the world, as I will show in Chapter 2.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, using the general framework outlined in the Introduction, I propose an interpretation of the 1920s which emphasizes a move toward particularism in this period, which also sets the stage for the analysis of the Communist discourse. In the second section, I briefly go back to the tradition of Russian radicals and revolutionaries, whose debates about seeing Russian development as exceptional in the late-19th century foreshadowed many of the same ideas (and in some cases, even the terminology) of the later American debates. In this context, it is also important to mention how Lenin and other prominent Marxist revolutionaries understood the peculiarities of the United States. After this, the third section returns to the America of the 1920s and presents how the contestation about the “Lovestoneite theory of exceptionalism” served as a focal point for the factional struggle within the American Communist Party, which resulted in the expulsion of Jay Lovestone (then-leader of the Party) and his followers. While the term was indeed used as a political *tool*, the debate, at the same time, drew on earlier theoretical and political arguments, as articulated by the Russian idols of the American Communists. The conclusion of the chapter

summarizes how the debate on exceptionalism defined the context of the Communist infight, and what the actors themselves *did* by invoking the concept, which soon became divorced from its narrow partisan frame, though it remained part of a broader leftist discourse for decades.

Making the World Safe for Particularism: From the Failure of Wilsonianism to the 1920s

In the conventional account, Wilson's compromises in the negotiations in Versailles induced isolationist sentiments back home, which led to the Senate's rejection of the League of Nations treaty, thus allowing isolationism to define American foreign policy for the interwar period. However, as historians of the "treaty fight" point out, the facts are more complex: first of all, at least initially, public opinion was in favor of American entry to the League, and not even members of the Senate themselves – perhaps with the few exceptions of the "Irreconcilables" opposing the U.S. joining the League in any form – can be easily characterized as isolationist. Indeed, Wilson's main nemesis in the fight, Republican leader Henry Cabot Lodge also supported some version of a League, or – in a similarly revolutionary idea for U.S. foreign relations – a peacetime alliance with the victors of the war. But, at the same time, he wanted to preserve fundamental elements of American sovereignty that he saw threatened by the treaty as accepted in Versailles, thus he added important "reservations" to the proposed Senate resolution. Therefore, as Restad notes, the debate was not between internationalism and isolationism, but rather between two competing visions of internationalism, a more multilateralist and a strongly unilateralist one.⁷³ In the end, perhaps political considerations and

⁷³ Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 130-137. See also: Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition: The Treaty Fight in Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 251-264. Knock distinguishes between Wilson's "liberal" and Lodge's "conservative" internationalism.

the personal inflexibility of both Lodge and Wilson (who had become incapacitated by a severe stroke by the time of the Senate votes) prevented a compromise: most Democrats and the “Irreconcilable” Republicans together voted down the version with Lodge’s reservations, while a treaty without reservations was rejected by almost all Republicans and even some Democrats.⁷⁴

Even if the treaty fight was mainly between competing understandings of internationalism, this does not exclude the possibility that due to the unfortunate combination of circumstances, an outcome that almost no one had preferred initially, namely, the dominance of isolationism, would emerge. Essentially, this is the argument of John Gerard Ruggie, who concluded that Lodge’s strict unilateralism also “undermined his own objective and helped usher in an era of isolationism.”⁷⁵ However, a closer look at interwar American foreign policy shows that the United States remained active in world politics – including in European affairs – during this period: isolationism certainly does not hold for the 1920s, and it is even problematic for the 1930s.⁷⁶ Under the Republican presidencies of Harding, Coolidge and Hoover, the U.S. actively participated in disarmament conferences (even hosting the Washington Naval Conference), took part in negotiations under League auspices (without formally joining the organization), encouraged the settlement in the Locarno treaties, and took the initiative in economic issues, including debt restructuring and reparations. The Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, advocated by Secretary of State Frank Kellogg, “outlawed” war, and – despite its obvious failure – made legal grounds for post-World War II accountability, while foreshadowing some

⁷⁴ In a new vote in March 1920, a number of Democrats broke with Wilson, and joined Republicans to adopt the treaty with Lodge’s reservations; however, the 49-35 vote still fell short of the two thirds majority required for ratification. Ambrosius, *Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition*, pp. 207-208, 248-249.

⁷⁵ John Gerard Ruggie, “The Past as Prologue? Interests, Identity, and American Foreign Policy,” *International Security* 21 (4) (Spring 1997), p. 97.

⁷⁶ Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 137-143; Bear F. Braumoeller, “The Myth of American Isolationism,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6(4) (Oct. 2010), pp. 349-371.

elements of the new United Nations regime. Indeed, these are not the policies of a country prepared to withdraw from the world.

At the same time, these policies were still far from the leadership role envisioned in Wilson's original plan, and observers could note that the United States remained reluctant to assume the responsibility justified by its increase in power.⁷⁷ According to Restad, the difference is that the multilateralism of the Wilsonian framework was replaced by unilateralism under the Republican presidents; in the end, Lodge won out against Wilson, and what separated their positions was the point that "Wilson thought [the League] would allow for American leadership, Lodge did not."⁷⁸ The historian Adam Tooze sees even less difference, and claims that if "we recognize Wilson for what he was – an exponent of turn-of-the-century high nationalism, bent on asserting America's exceptional claim to pre-eminence on a global scale – then what is more striking is the continuity between his administration and the Republicans who followed."⁷⁹ Exceptionalism, understood in her book as the identity behind a continuous unilateralist internationalism, is also Restad's reasoning for Wilson's failure and Lodge's success; the United States did not want to become one "among others" within the structure of the League, and thus chose the unilateralist path instead.

However, multilateralism and unilateralism both refer to *tools*, while some elements in the *purposes* of Wilson's ambitious program were also missing even if U.S. foreign policy is conceptualized as unilateralist internationalism in this period. Remaining outside of the League sent the message to other nations that the United States was not committed to maintaining international (political) order, while the issues in which Americans *were* involved pointed to a type of activism where the United States wanted to *limit the dangers* coming from the outside:

⁷⁷ Kiran Klaus Patel, *The New Deal: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 10-24.

⁷⁸ Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 132.

⁷⁹ Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916-31* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 348.

be it either economic or military, which explains why debt reduction, disarmament and outlawing aggression were the crucial objectives. Those points of Wilson's that demanded an involvement in the domestic affairs of other countries were conspicuously absent: promoting the causes of democracy and self-determination would, of course, have contradicted the Republican emphasis on state sovereignty. But the Wilsonian argument was based on the assumption that the domestic and the international cannot be completely separated; his lesson from the outbreak of World War I was that oppression (internal or external) and domestic disturbances could lead to international conflict. From this perspective, it was not only multilateralism that was rejected (though, of course, this is also part of the story), but Wilsonian universalism was abandoned in favor of particularism under Republican administrations. The denial of the universal relevance of American values and principles does not preclude an activist foreign policy; thus, if we follow the framework presented in the Introduction, American foreign policy can be seen as moving from the upper-left toward the upper-right cell in Table 4.

Table 4. Positions in the “treaty fight” and the move toward particularism in the 1920s.

	Universalism	Particularism
Activism	Wilsonian universalism 	Republican sovereigntism (Lodge, Harding, Coolidge, Hoover)
Withdrawal	Liberal critics of the League	“Irreconcilable” treaty opponents

Some discourses and policies of the early 1920s further reinforce this point: rejecting Wilson's commitment to free trade, Republicans returned to protectionism, while this was also the period when the United States severely limited immigration for the first time in its history. The discussions of the era reflect an understanding that these developments were deeply connected

to the issues on the international level; indeed, one of the justifications for the reservations cited in the debate was to prevent the League from intervening in American immigration policies – the United States wanted to reserve the right to decide who can and who cannot be allowed within its borders, and it is not a coincidence that Lodge was also an early proponent of immigration restriction.⁸⁰ The securitization of the danger posed by anyone deemed to be “foreign” or “radical” hardened a racialized understanding of the nation; the proposition that certain targets of these policies (mostly Jewish Eastern Europeans, Southern Europeans, Asians) were unable to assimilate to American values and practices refuted the universalistic reading of those values and principles. In some sense, this development was deeply anti-exceptionalist as it “signaled the determination of the United States to transform itself into a nation like the others.”⁸¹

Before proceeding, two qualifications are in order. First, these discourses go much further back in American history, and certainly did not appear with World War I. A racial understanding of the American nation had been the very foundational principle of the identity of the American South, making it even the source of its own exceptionalism within the nation, while turn-of-the-century imperialism was based on a belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority and civilizational duty.⁸² Moreover, the notion that cities packed with immigrants corrupt the virtues of the countryside had regularly appeared alongside the ideas of reform movements like Populism. This tradition survived in Progressivism; it had an exclusionary aspect, sometimes combined with virulent anti-Semitism, or manifested in the xenophobic rhetoric connected to the

⁸⁰ Aristide Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 200; 245-248; Ambrosius, *Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition*, p. 149. See also: Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 81-127.

⁸¹ Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, p. 244.

⁸² On “Southern exceptionalism,” see: David A. Bateman, Ira Katznelson, and John S. Lapinski, *Southern Nation: Congress and White Supremacy after the Reconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 41-56. On Anglo-Saxon superiority, see: Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, pp. 79-100.

temperance movement, which culminated in Prohibition.⁸³ Certainly, proposals for immigration restriction had been on the congressional agenda for decades. Although multiple presidents (Cleveland, Taft, and Wilson) vetoed restrictionist legislations, these were carried by larger and larger majorities, suggesting that some limitation would have been inevitable regardless of the war or the subsequent Republican return to power.⁸⁴ Second, Wilson's own commitments to universalism – at least as we understand it now – can be questioned, too. After all, as the first Southern-born president of the post-Civil War period, he had his own racist beliefs (sometimes turned into policy as well), and he adhered to the “lost cause” narrative in some form. Although his views on the Civil War were more nuanced (for example, Lincoln was one of his role models, though he condemned the “radical Republicans” of the Reconstruction era), his position on immigration – despite his veto – was ambiguous as well, and his racist attitudes were also manifested on the international level; for instance, he worked to keep out the principle of racial equality from the preamble of the Versailles treaty.⁸⁵

Notwithstanding these qualifications, we can still conclude that the war's aftermath elicited a pronounced move toward particularism in foreign-policy discourse. As for the first one, the earlier existence of those exclusionary discourses does not refute the view that their specific formulation was influenced by perceptions of the post-war situation. Indeed, even an earlier opponent of restriction conceded retrospectively in 1927 “that the War required new methods of restricting immigration,” and Zolberg also notes that both the treaty debate and immigration regulation “were hammered out within a worldwide climate of tightening borders and increasing restriction on the movement of persons, triggered initially by rising international

⁸³ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955)

⁸⁴ Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, pp. 199-238.

⁸⁵ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright, 2013), p. 145; Stephen Skowronek, “The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes: Racism, Liberalism, and the American Political Tradition,” *American Political Science Review* 100(3) (August 2006), p. 389. On Wilson's views on immigration, see Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, p. 237.

tensions culminating in the conflagration, but reinforced afterwards by economic difficulties and political instability.”⁸⁶ Even more importantly from the point of view of the rest of this chapter, the news of the Russian Revolution also reframed immigration policy, as the fear of the foreign was now connected to the fear of the radical, culminating in the “Red Scare” persecution of Communists and other radical leftists, also reinforcing anti-Semitism given the Jewish (and Eastern European) origins of many leftist leaders.⁸⁷ Regarding the second, even if Wilson’s views were much more complex than to be simply characterized as universalism, the point here is how the abstract ideas of Wilsonianism were emphatically rejected in the post-war period after the contestation of the treaty fight. Moreover, as Stephen Skowronek convincingly argues, neither the frame of the “progressive” nor the “reactionary” Wilson tells the whole story; in fact, it is notable how Wilson produced a version of American liberalism out of a peculiar mix of liberal thought and racist prejudice, often through the exchange and appropriation of ideas by putting them into a new context – his emphasis on national self-determination, for instance, had its roots in the Southern perception of an “oppressive” “foreign” Northern government in the Reconstruction era.⁸⁸ Tony Smith also emphasizes that Wilsonian thinking combined universalism with some particularist elements by stressing democracy, collective security, economic openness and the necessity for American leadership at the same time.⁸⁹ For Smith, this is exactly the foundation of Wilson’s innovation in

⁸⁶ Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, p. 245.

⁸⁷ Gerstle, *American Crucible*, pp. 97-101. Of course, the securitization of radicalism had also been an ongoing process as the first restrictions came following William McKinley’s assassination by an anarchist in 1901, but here it is also true that the war (and the revolution in Russia) affected the evolution of the discourse, leading to stricter regulations.

⁸⁸ Tellingly, some Republicans in the Senate debate opposed the principle of self-determination, because taken to its extreme, it could justify Southern secession, or, as Lodge claimed, it was “pure hypocrisy to have such a suggestion come from a country which fought for four years to destroy the right of self-determination.” On the other hand, Southern politicians were worried that “American participation would open a back door to racial agitation” for the cause of racial equality. Similarly, the League was viewed as either too reactionary or too revolutionary at the same time by some of its critics. Skowronek, “The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes,” pp. 397-398.

⁸⁹ Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origins of Liberal Internationalism and its Crisis Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 10-22.

exceptionalism, because “[b]y redirecting American feelings about the world outside to one based on its democratic character – and away from the one that was racial or religious – Americans might continue to feel superior, even exceptional, but nonetheless involved in developments outside their borders in a more expansive and positive fashion.”⁹⁰ Notably, the problem of combining universalism and particularism is also the very basis of our approach to exceptionalism, as outlined previously.

Therefore, after the war, and especially with the Russian Revolution, external dangers were interpreted in a new way, reinforcing a particularist and exclusionary understanding of the American nation, and bringing about the “Red Scare” against the supposed threat of radical universalism. This was a remarkable development given the widely accepted belief in the backward state of American socialism, which could have dampened the salience of any perceived “radical threat.” In 1906, the German sociologist Werner Sombart asked the question *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* – creating an obligatory point of reference for every exceptionalist work in the literature for the next century.⁹¹ Certainly, socialism *was* relatively on the rise exactly in the period when Sombart published his book – the support for the Socialist Party peaked during the uncharacteristic four-way presidential election of 1912 when Eugene Debs secured 6 percent of the votes (coming from around 900,000 voters), but despite expectations that an even bigger upswing would follow, Debs could repeat the result only once, in 1920, when some 900,000 people voted for him again, but this time, it only amounted to 3.4% of total ballots.⁹² The reach of socialism was inherently limited by the structure of the American party system, as well as by peculiar characteristics of American

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 75. Of course, this account by Smith somewhat downplays the enduring racial component of Wilsonianism, which is highlighted by Skowronek.

⁹¹ Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*

⁹² Ira Katznelson notes the irony regarding Sombart’s work that “there was a significant socialist movement in America, especially in the period in which he wrote.” Ira Katznelson, “Considerations on Social Democracy in the United States,” *Comparative Politics* 11(1) (Oct. 1978), p. 95.

development, related to the relatively early adoption of white male suffrage, to the prioritization of sectional interests stemming from the peculiar racial order of the South and to the difficulties related to the organization of a multi-ethnic workforce.⁹³

Nevertheless, radicalism was interpreted as a danger at this moment of American history, and the universalism of Marxists was definitely seen as a rival – or, from the point of view of his opponents, as an inevitable corollary – to Wilson’s. For his part, Wilson originally sympathized with certain socialist positions, but by the time of the Bolshevik takeover of Russia, he primarily regarded communism as a threat, and believed that his reform of world politics was necessary in order to prevent the spread of a global revolutionary wave.⁹⁴ The war-time Espionage and Sedition Acts were used to target radical groups (leading to the imprisonment of, among others, Eugene Debs), while in the immediate post-war period, the Department of Justice ruthlessly persecuted anarchists and Communists in the so-called Palmer Raids, named after Wilson’s Attorney General. In 1919, Palmer appointed a young J. Edgar Hoover to lead the Radical Division of the Department’s Bureau of Investigation, the precursor of the FBI; for the next half-century, Hoover’s ferocious methods and deep anti-communist convictions

⁹³ The evaluation of these arguments on the weakness of American socialism is beyond the scope of this thesis. For some important points, see: Katznelson, “Considerations on Social Democracy in the United States;” Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), pp. 7-17; Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 18-44; Seymour Martin Lipset, “Radicalism or Reformism: The Sources of Working-class Politics,” *The American Political Science Review* 77(1) (March 1983), pp. 1-18; Eric Foner, “Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?” *History Workshop* 17 (Spring 1984), pp. 57-80. On the absence of socialism in the development of U.S. party ideology, see: John Gerring, *Party Ideology in America, 1828-1996* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 37-40. On the relationship between the underdevelopment of socialism and sectional conflicts, see: Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, part II, “Southern Cage,” esp. pp. 133-135; Bateman et al., *Southern Nation*; Richard Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859-1877* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 7. The exceptionalist framework is refuted by: Sean Wilentz, “Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 26 (Fall 1984), pp. 1-24.

⁹⁴ On Wilson’s early socialist influences, see: Knock, *To End All Wars*, pp. 6-9. A comparison of Wilson’s and Marx’s view is made in: Smith, *Why Wilson Matters*, pp. 32-34. On “Lenin and Wilson” and the birth of American anti-communism, see: Richard Gid Powers, *Not without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism* (New York: Free Press, 1995), pp. 1-15. On the “Red Scare” and Wilson’s anti-revolutionary politics, see: Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 113-116.

defined the official approach to radical organizations – although open persecution abated soon, he continuously aimed to disrupt the activities of these groups with secret intelligence operations.

This was the environment in which American Communism was founded in 1919, afflicted by not just the anti-communist fervor of the time, which forced the organization into illegality, but also exacerbated by bitter internal divisions that will be further explored below.⁹⁵ The weak position of Communists in America seemingly contradicted the universal validity of the theories of Marxism; therefore, this was the context in which American radicals were looking for explanations of their own precarious situation and the underdevelopment of a worldview that was – according to their beliefs – bound to be the path for progress. As the center of global communism undeniably moved to Moscow, U.S. party leaders were looking to the teachings of the Russian revolutionaries to resolve the tension between Marxist theory and American realities. Therefore, before moving to the Communist discourse of American exceptionalism in the 1920s, it is useful to make a detour to explore the Marxist, and especially Russian, origins of the idea.

Tell Me I'm Exceptional: Russian Origins

This section pursues three major points related to the Russian and Communist origins of American exceptionalism. First, I highlight the sources of “distinctiveness” and

⁹⁵ In fact, not one, but two Communist Parties were formed in 1919, as one group (built around the “language federations” consisting of primarily Eastern European immigrants) favored an immediate split from the Socialist Party of America, while another group attempted a leftist takeover of Socialists. When this takeover failed, they founded their own Communist Labor Party. The two parties were unified under the urge of strongly-worded directives coming from Moscow, threatening Americans that they cannot receive full Comintern membership as long as they remain divided. On the early history of American Communism, see: Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking Press, 1957); for a June 1920 Comintern letter emphasizing that the “split is doing great harm,” see: *The Communist International, 1919-43: Documents*, ed. Jane Degras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956-65), vol. I, p. 101.

“exceptionalism” in Russian thinking which made its way to the discourse of late nineteenth-century revolutionaries – with a markedly negative understanding. Second, the early twentieth-century Leninist idea of “uneven development” (originally appearing in a work of Trotsky) shows an attempt to reconcile particularistic differences and a universalist theory within a Marxist framework; this was directly relevant to the discussions of American Communists. Third, not unrelatedly, I note how Lenin and other Russian Marxists viewed the unique characteristics of the United States and its potential for socialism. Because in this section I identify transformations across languages, and often work with translations where the correspondence between certain terms and ideas is never perfect, it is especially important to move between the methods that the German conceptual historians described as *semasiology* (“the study of all meanings of a term, word, or concept”) and *onomasiology* (“the study of all names or terms for the same things or concept”).⁹⁶ Thus, different terms for the idea behind uniqueness or exceptionalism will be considered alongside tracing the changes in the meaning of the term.

It is important to emphasize that the discourses of uniqueness or mission are not limited to the Russian – or the American – case; in fact, almost all nations perpetuate similar narratives, be it either German distinctiveness, nineteenth-century British destinarianism, or turn-of-the-century French *mission civilisatrice*.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, we want to trace a particular line of thought in which ideas born inside Russia laid the groundwork for a partly modified version of Marxism which intended to explain distinctive developmental paths. This stems from nineteenth-century Russian debates between Westernizing efforts and Slavophile

⁹⁶ Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts*, p. 11. See also: Jordheim and Neumann, “Empire, imperialism, and conceptual history,” p. 155.

⁹⁷ Michael Lind, *The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 1996), pp. 227-231.

understandings of Russian uniqueness, about which we do not need to go into detail here.⁹⁸ It is enough to note that, already in 1863, the emigrant Alexander Herzen wrote within this context about Russia's "savage exceptionalism," manifested "in hatred toward anything foreign, and in the indiscriminate use of the courts and harsh punishments."⁹⁹ Still, Herzen also believed in the unique capabilities of the Russian peasantry to create a particular form of socialism, and his ideological followers, the Populists of the 1860s and 1870s, asserted that Russia "had no need to recapitulate all of the steps taken by more advanced nations," thus it can shorten the time of its own development.¹⁰⁰ This differed markedly from the position of Russian Marxists who – at least at this initial stage – argued that Russia also needed to go through a phase of capitalist development before a move toward socialism. Georgy Plekhanov, one of the earliest proponents of Marxism within Russia, laid out the theoretical foundations in his 1883 work *Socialism and the Political Struggle* in which he harshly criticized the exceptionalist view:

The idea of Russian exceptionalism received a new elaboration, and whereas previously it had led to the complete rejection of politics, it now turned out that the exceptionalism of Russian social development consisted precisely in economic questions being and having to be solved in our country by means of state interference. The extremely widespread ignorance here in Russia of the economic history of the West provided the reason why nobody was amazed at "theories" of this kind.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ For an overview of the development of messianic thinking in Russia, see: Peter Duncan, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Revolution, Communism and after* (London: Routledge, 2000), esp. chapters 1-4. About the Slavophile ideas and influences, see: Derek Offord, "The people," in: *A History of Russian Thought*, eds. William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 243-246.

⁹⁹ Alexander Herzen, "I. Kelsiev and N. Utin," *The Bell*, No. 169, August 15, 1863 in: Alexander Herzen, *A Herzen Reader*, ed. Kathleen Parthé (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2012), p. 209. (Emphasis added.) In the original Russian text (*The Bell*, No. 169, p. 1390), Herzen used the word исключительность ("exclusiveness", "exceptionality", "exceptionalism") – interestingly, it is not the same word that was translated to "exceptionalism" later in some English versions of certain works of Russian Marxists; though it *is* the word that is used for "American exceptionalism" in the contemporary context.

¹⁰⁰ Wayle Dowler, "The intelligentsia and capitalism," in: *A History of Russian Thought*, p. 276.

¹⁰¹ In the original, "Russian exceptionalism" was written as русской самобытности ("Russian originality", "Russian distinctiveness"). The first known English translation is from 1960, which suggests that the use of "exceptionalism" and not a different word in the context of this translation happened *after* the debate in American Communism and the subsequent use of this term for all kind of "deviations" from Stalin's line such as Titoism. Nevertheless, as we see below, Plekhanov's ideas were clearly reflected in Lenin's works, which were, in turn, taken up by American Communists. Georgy Plekhanov, *Socialism and the Political Struggle* (1883), ch. 1, *The Marxist Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/plekhanov/1883/struggle/chap1.htm>. The translation is from Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), translator

For Plekhanov, “the notion of ethnic and cultural distinctiveness ... had no place” in the “scientific” outlook of Marxism as exceptionalists ignored the universal relevance of Western history.¹⁰² Proponents of a distinctive Russian path also committed the mistake of merely differentiating between “Russia and abroad,” where “abroad” meant an oversimplified “completely homogeneous whole.” Thus, whereas Russia was construed as unique, distinctions between different forms of “Western” social development were overshadowed, which reproduced the view of Russia as “advancing to their salvation as a chosen people along the road of exceptionalism” with preserving their “‘primitive’ innocence.”¹⁰³ Therefore, Plekhanov criticized beliefs in Russian distinctiveness from the point of view of a universalist theory; at the same time, he also showed a limited inclination to accept particular divergences and heterogeneity – an idea which was further elaborated in the notion of “uneven development.”

Plekhanov’s views on Russian exceptionalism definitely influenced Lenin who also strongly rejected the Narodniks’ (Russia’s Populists) “idealization of the peasantry, the village community” and wrote in 1897 that

[t]he doctrine of Russia’s exceptionalism induced the Narodniks to seize upon out-dated West-European theories, prompted them to regard many of the achievements of West-European culture with amazing levity: the Narodniks reassured themselves with the thought that, if we lacked some of the features of civilised humanity, “we are destined,” on the other hand, to show the world new modes of economy, etc. Not only was the analysis of capitalism and all its manifestations given by progressive West-European thought not accepted in relation to Holy Russia; every effort was made to invent excuses for not drawing the same conclusions about Russian capitalism as were made regarding European capitalism. [...] Again, this doctrine of Russia’s exceptionalism, which is shared by all the Narodniks, far from having anything in common with the “heritage,” runs directly counter to it.¹⁰⁴

unknown, vol. I, p. 64.

<https://archive.org/details/GeorgiPlekhanovsSelectedPhilosophicalWorksVolume1/page/n65>

¹⁰² Offord, “The People,” p. 255.

¹⁰³ Plekhanov, *Socialism and The Political Struggle*, ch. 1 in: *Selected Philosophical Works*, vol. I, pp. 64-65.

¹⁰⁴ Lenin used the same term as Plekhanov: *самобытность России* (“originality of Russia”). In fact, an earlier translation, published by Moscow’s state-run Foreign Language Publishing House presumably in the mid-1950s, used “the doctrine of Russia’s originality” in the sentence quoted above (see:

<https://books.google.hu/books?id=ijxsSdvPVzoC&dq=heritage+we+renounce&focus=searchwithinvolume&q=originality>.) The translation above was first published in 1960; again, later than the original American debate on exceptionalism. V.I. Lenin, *The Heritage We Renounce* (1897),

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1897/dec/31c.htm>. Translation is from Lenin’s *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), translated by Yuri Sdobnikov and George Hanna, vol. 2, pp. 517-518. Reprinted from 1960 translation.

Here, Lenin talked about the “heritage of the 1860s and 70s,” a period of (limited) universalist reforms with the aim of Europeanizing (and capitalizing) Russia, which was believed to be a necessary stage by Marxists. Consequently, at the turn of the century, Lenin embraced the *rule* in Marxist theory and denounced the emphasis on the *exception* of a unique Russian progress.

At the same time, of course, had Lenin and his co-revolutionaries remained entirely faithful to Marx’s theories, the Bolshevik revolution would never have occurred, at least not in the form in which it later materialized. In order to resolve this tension, the idea of “uneven development” was outlined. In the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1905, Trotsky began to examine the “the peculiarities of Russian historical development,” and while remaining within the Marxist framework, he soon doubted that capitalism in Russia needed to take the same path as in England.¹⁰⁵ Thus, he believed that Russia “acquired its absolutely specific character because it received its capitalist baptism in the latter half of the nineteenth century from European capital, which by then had reached its most concentrated and abstract form, that of finance capital.”¹⁰⁶ Later he further developed the idea in his theory of *uneven and combined development* outlined in *The History of the Russian Revolution* (first published in Germany in 1930):

Unevenness, the most general law of the historic process, reveals itself most sharply and complexly in the destiny of the backward countries. Under the whip of external necessity their backward culture is compelled to make leaps. From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law which, for the lack of a better name, we may call the law of *combined development* – by which we mean a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms.¹⁰⁷

This was, of course, published at a time when Trotsky was already in exile, and “American exceptionalists” were expelled from the party; alternatives to Stalinism were not tolerated within Communism, while Stalin’s allies could use the slur of “exceptionalism” to delegitimize

¹⁰⁵ Leon Trotsky, *Results and Prospects* (1906), first translated to English by the Communist International in 1921. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/rp-index.htm>

¹⁰⁶ Trotsky is quoted in: Dowler, “The intelligentsia and capitalism,” p. 280.

¹⁰⁷ Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1932), translated by Max Eastman, pp. 5-6. (Emphasis in the original.)

political opponents.¹⁰⁸ However, “uneven development” was not supposed to be a controversial idea in the Leninist world: Trotsky’s argument “paved the way for Lenin’s case ... that as the weakest capitalist link in the imperial chain, [Russia] was a legitimate subject for proletarian revolution and a catalyst for revolution elsewhere.”¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the term was picked up in Lenin’s foundational *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), where he brought it up in connection with the export of capital and wrote that “both uneven development and a semi-starvation level of existence of the masses are fundamental and inevitable conditions and constitute premises of this [capitalist] mode of production.”¹¹⁰ As with the turn toward particularism in America, World War I proved to be a decisive inflection point in the evolution of Russia’s revolutionary Marxism, leaving behind the “law” which would have required capitalist development for Russia, and justifying the logic of the exception. At the same time, in a polemic with Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin still condemned “national exceptionalism” in the context of the so-called “national question”: he reiterated that – despite the bourgeoisie’s efforts to secure “privileges and exceptional advantages for its *own* nation” – “[t]he proletariat is opposed to all privileges, to all exceptionalism.”¹¹¹ Therefore, Lenin could serve as a point of reference for both sides of the American debate: both as an advocate of unique national paths, and as an opponent of “national exceptionalism.”

¹⁰⁸ In addition, Max Eastman, who translated Trotsky’s book to English, was about to begin his ideological journey together with many members of the Lovestone faction of the Communist Party, which resulted in their complete anti-communist transformation in less than a decade.

¹⁰⁹ Dowler, “The intelligentsia and capitalism,” p. 281.

¹¹⁰ V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), “IV. Export Capital,” *Marxist Internet Archive* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/ch04.htm>. Translation is from Lenin’s *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963), vol. 1, pp. 667-766.

¹¹¹ V. I. Lenin, *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* (1914) in: Lenin’s *Selected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1946), p. 575. <https://archive.org/details/leninselectedwor035434mbp/page/n585>. In the Russian original, Lenin used the word исключительность which is different from what Plekhanov and Lenin himself had been using earlier for “Russian distinctiveness” (though the same as Herzen had used). Interestingly, in a 1963 translation, the English version is “exclusiveness,” not exceptionalism. This is what we can find on the *Marxist Internet Archive* – based on the 1964 translation of Lenin’s *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), vol 20, p. 410. Translated by Bernard Isaacs and Joe Fineberg. (This is a reprint of the 1964 version.) See: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/self-det/ch04.htm>

American Communists were, of course, also interested in what Lenin had to say about their own country even though, as Harvey Klehr notes, “his theoretical discussions of the United States were insignificant, sporadic, and largely *ad hoc*.”¹¹² Nevertheless, in a 1918 *Letter to the American workers*, Lenin indeed made remarks that reflected his principle of uneven development: “the revolution is developing in different countries in different forms and at different tempos,” he claimed, suggesting that in America, it would “probably not come soon.”¹¹³ In a way, it was the continuation of Marx’s and Engels’s own fragmented writings on the conditions in America: Marx was also inclined to accept that variations within the developmental path could occur due to America’s former colonial status, while Engels, like the later American “consensus historians,” emphasized the lack of a feudal past in America to explain the divergence from the stages in Western European development.¹¹⁴ However, neither observation amounted to a fully developed theory of exceptionalism, while Lenin also took a different direction following World War I. Although in his pre-war writings, he left room for recognizing certain unique characteristics as the reasons of the weakness of socialism in developed countries, after 1917, his turn toward imperialism also served as a conceptual tool against exceptionalist ideas – thus, his “concept of imperialism obviated the need for Lenin and future Leninists to inquire about the past failure of American socialism.”¹¹⁵

Around the same time, Plekhanov similarly upheld that no country can defy the universal “laws of history,” thus he maintained that “in all the leading states of the civilized states of the civilized world, in Europe, as well as in America, the working class is entering the arena of

¹¹² Harvey Klehr, *The Theory of American Exceptionalism*. Doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1971, p. 66. See also: Harvey Klehr, “Leninist Theory in Search of America,” *Polity* 9(1) (Autumn 1976), p. 85.

¹¹³ Lenin is quoted in: Klehr, *The Theory of American Exceptionalism*, p. 81.

¹¹⁴ Harvey Klehr, “Marxist Theory in Search of America,” *The Journal of Politics* 35(2) (May 1973), pp. 311-331.

¹¹⁵ Klehr, “Leninist Theory in Search of America,” p. 90.

political struggle.”¹¹⁶ However, he also recognized certain peculiarities of America: he highlighted its unique political freedom, and attempted to use this fact in explaining the “entirely original or unique” phenomenon that American workers assimilated the views of the bourgeois parties.¹¹⁷ Moreover, he referred to Turner’s thesis on the availability of abundant land as a factor for the weakness of American socialism, while, in another article, he argued that – contrary to Marx’s theory – trade unions had not become “schools of socialism” because of “exceptional economic circumstances.” In a review of Sombart’s book on the lack of American socialism, Plekhanov claimed that the fact that the United States had “never known feudal or patriarchal relations ... [was] one of those exceptions which only confirms the general rule.”¹¹⁸ This is indeed surprising from someone who twenty years before vehemently attacked the exceptionalist tendencies of the Russian Populists. Although he referred to it in the context of Sombart’s book, even the fact that he wrote a mostly positive review is notable given the rejections Sombart got from other socialists – precisely because of the tensions between his argument and orthodox Marxist thinking. In the U.S., for example, the periodical *International Socialist Review* decided not to print the second part of the book when it “came to the nonsense on the condition of the American worker.”¹¹⁹ Of course, Plekhanov did not completely betray Marx’s theories: he emphasized that these peculiarities did not mean an “exemption from the workings of the law-governed historical process,” and neither did he give up on the necessity of a future revolution.¹²⁰ Still, his argument was a precursor to some of the ideas articulated in the debates within American Communism some twenty years later.

¹¹⁶ Samuel H. Baron, “Plekhanov and American exceptionalism,” in: Baron, *Plekhanov in Russian History and Soviet Historiography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), p. 139.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 141. David Hecht also notes the use of the word *exceptional* in his summary of Plekhanov’s thinking on American socialism. David Hecht, “Plekhanov and American Socialism,” *The Russian Review* 9(2) (Apr. 1950), pp. 114-115, fn. 9.

¹¹⁹ Baron, “Plekhanov and American exceptionalism,” p. 142.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 143; Hecht, “Plekhanov and American Socialism,” p. 117.

By the time Plekhanov reviewed Sombart's book, he was already Lenin's political opponent; in 1917, he was against the Bolshevik takeover as he attacked Lenin's party from the right. Nevertheless, as mentioned, a possible unique American path was also formulated in terms of the theory of uneven development, which will be further elaborated in the context of the American discourse. In this section, we have seen that the idea of exception had its antecedents in Russian thought, and the very term – even though discrepancies in translations make the picture somewhat more complicated – first arose concerning Russia's own evolution. Ironically, "Russian exceptionalism" was forgotten for a few decades¹²¹ exactly at a point when Russia was reconstituted as distinctive: as the only country in which Communists were about to gain and consolidate power, it *did* engage in a unique mission, namely, spreading the idea of Communist revolution. Thus, the debate on the "Lovestoneite theory of American exceptionalism" – to which we now turn – took place in parallel with an unspoken recognition of Russian (or Soviet) exceptionalism within the communist world.

The Rise and Fall of the "Lovestoneite Theory of American Exceptionalism"

Forced into illegality under the persecution of the early 1920s, American Communists had internal divisions about how to address local circumstances and how to prepare for an upcoming crisis – if it was about to strike at all. Certainly, in much of the twenties the menace of an American crisis seemed far-fetched; the United States was developing rapidly as it became the greatest economic power in the world thanks to Europe's post-war difficulties. In addition, Lenin's theory on imperialism provided an explanation to the upsurge: America was still ascendant, and it could use its newly acquired imperial powers – including its dominance

¹²¹ See: Galin Tihanov, "Continuities in the Soviet Period," in: *A History of Russian Thought*, pp. 321-329.

in the Americas and in the Pacific – to postpone its own disturbances. At the same time, the internal debates were sometimes nothing more than disagreements on preferred tactics, and even these did not justify the fierce rivalry between the two groups, one dominated by U.S.-born labor union activists centered in Chicago, and the other, New York-based, largely immigrant, and more intellectual, wing.¹²² While the group in Chicago mostly favored an approach working through traditional labor unions, the New York faction – originally led by Charles Ruthenberg, but later known as the “Lovestoneites” after Jay Lovestone took over the leadership following Ruthenberg’s death – proposed “dual unionism” and the formation of a broader labor party. Nevertheless, the real decisions on tactics were made in Moscow, and the Comintern repeatedly called for the “immediate cessation of the fractional struggle,” which – as a Comintern thesis declared even amid the ideological left-turn of its Sixth World Congress in 1928 – had “no foundation in serious difference of principle.”¹²³

Therefore, as Harvey Klehr admitted in the introduction to his dissertation written on *The theory of American exceptionalism*, although he began his work under the assumption “that the theory of exceptionalism had been significant;” he had to conclude that this debate “did not advance understanding of America, for both parties [of the factional struggle] began with assumptions irrelevant to America.”¹²⁴ Klehr also concluded that despite being condemned by Moscow as a “heresy” to the Marxist-Leninist tradition, the “Lovestoneite theory of American exceptionalism was firmly bounded by Leninist premises.”¹²⁵ Debating Klehr’s conclusion to some extent, Jacob Zumoff also adds to this that “Lovestone reflected the Stalinist degeneration of the Comintern,” because without the Stalinist turn in Russia, the exceptionalist discourse

¹²² For the history of American Communism, see: Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* and his *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking Press, 1960).

¹²³ The first quote is from a report for the sixth enlarged plenum of the Comintern (Feb-March 1926), the second is from “Extracts from theses of Sixth Comintern Congress (1928 Aug.) in: *The Communist International, 1919-43: Documents*, vol. II, pp. 248; 463.

¹²⁴ Klehr, *The Theory of American Exceptionalism*, p. 2.

¹²⁵ Harvey Klehr, ‘Leninism and Lovestoneism,’ *Studies in Comparative Communism* 7(1-2) (Spring-Summer 1974), p. 11.

would never have been formulated in the United States in the way it was. Furthermore, as Zumoff observes, already in 1927 in Stalin's thinking, "Russia was so exceptional that it alone could build socialism in isolation amid a revitalised capitalist world," thus – quoting Trotsky – "[w]hatever exceptionalism Lovestone & Co. sought for the United States, it could not be higher than that the one Stalin secured for the USSR by Comintern decree."¹²⁶

Even if we accept these views, it is important to see how the concept of exceptionalism started to mean something different in later years. As Klehr tellingly points out in his dissertation, "[i]nstead of leading to a theoretical understanding of the weaknesses of radicalism in America, however, the theory of exceptionalism vividly demonstrated those weaknesses."¹²⁷ Therefore, the early development of the discourse reveals more of the problems of U.S. radicalism than of America itself, but precisely this raises a subsequent question of how, after recognizing the limitations of the communist approaches, some of those radicals began to contemplate the United States in different terms, though partly retaining the use of Marxist language. In this way, the transformation of the discourse can remind us of what Skowronek described as the appropriation and "reassociation" of ideas in Wilson's case, recognizing that "a political tradition is not a coherent set of political ambitions but a common grammar through which ambitions are manipulated and redefined."¹²⁸ Exceptionalism, as an attempt to reconcile the tension between universal laws and particular exceptions, lived on even if the context of those very laws and exceptions had changed.

Nevertheless, the foreign influences on this discourse cannot be disregarded. In the previous section, we saw how the relationship between the general laws of Marxism and the particular paths of certain nations were already discussed in the context of Russian development by Lenin

¹²⁶ Jacob Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism 1919-1929* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 247.

¹²⁷ Klehr, *The Theory of American Exceptionalism*, p. 2.

¹²⁸ Skowronek, "The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes," p. 400.

and Plekhanov before the revolution. Therefore, when Lovestone (as leader of the CPUSA) claimed that American capitalism was “still in the ascendancy,” and because its peak “has not yet been reached,” and so revolution in the United States was not imminent, he simply translated the theory of uneven development to the American situation.¹²⁹ While his factional opponents “emphasized the voluntaristic elements of Leninism,” i.e. the role of revolutionary individuals, Lovestone believed in “the need for objective conditions to reach a certain point before a country is ripe for revolution.”¹³⁰ Thus, he implemented Lenin’s theory on imperialism by claiming that the world – with the exception of the USSR – “was virtually in bondage to American imperialism,” which was “youthful, vigorous, and growing.”¹³¹ Furthermore, his arguments merely followed the official position of the Bukharin-led Comintern: in 1925, the Hungarian-born chief economist in Moscow, Eugen Varga changed his earlier prediction about an approaching crisis in America, and announced that “American capitalism is still healthy... [and compared to European capitalism] it is certainly on the upgrade.”¹³² This became the official Comintern line, and in the same year, Bukharin declared that in the U.S. – which remained a “stronghold of the entire capitalist system” – “[o]ur tasks ... are for the present still very modest.”¹³³ Therefore, as Klehr notes, the so-called exceptionalist theory was simply an orthodox, deterministic reading of Leninism, and “American exceptionalism was no exception: even the *terms* of this argument were decided in Moscow.”¹³⁴

Although Lovestone and his allies began to contemplate how to “Americanize” the Communist movement, they did it under their narrow Leninist – or even Stalinist – framework. In fact, the main theoretician of the group did not even spend more than a few years in America: József

¹²⁹ Jay Lovestone, “Perspectives for Our Party,” *The Communist* 6(4) (June 1927), p. 200.

¹³⁰ Klehr, “Leninism and Lovestoneism,” p. 18.

¹³¹ Jay Lovestone, “The New America: The American Empire,” *The Workers Monthly* 4(9) (July 1925), pp. 392, 394.

¹³² Varga is quoted in: Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, p. 270.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 271-2.

¹³⁴ Klehr, *The Theory of American Exceptionalism*, pp. 93-94. (Emphasis mine.)

Pogány, one of the leaders of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, first arrived to the U.S. from his Moscow emigration in 1921 as part of a Comintern assignment.¹³⁵ While he did not even speak English when he entered the United States, Pogány – who adopted the pseudonym John Pepper during his stay in America – started to study American life already in 1922-23, and soon became an advocate for the Americanization of Communism. Contending that “[t]he division into 16 languages is the greatest obstacle to the development of the Workers Party as a political factor,” he proclaimed the slogan “Be American!” while proposing several changes – including the launch of the *Daily Worker*, the first daily U.S. Communist publication in English – to strengthen the American identity of the party.¹³⁶ Moreover, under Lovestone’s and Pepper’s leadership, Communists began to re-interpret American history. In an article written for the 150th anniversary of the American revolution, Bertram Wolfe – a close associate of Lovestone who later turned into a strongly anti-communist historian – suggested that the left needed to “discover America” in its valuable traditions such as the Bill of Rights, and argued that just because the revolution “did not live up to the glowing promises of the Declaration of Independence, [it cannot be said that it] did not accomplish anything.”¹³⁷ Discarding the earlier interpretation of 1776 as a capitalist “counter-revolution” led by “smugglers” and “land speculators,” Wolfe called on Communists to embrace their *heritage* – evoking the language that Lenin used in his above-mentioned piece on Russian Communists being “more consistent and truer guardians to the inheritance than the Narodniks.”¹³⁸ At the same time, as Klehr concludes, the efforts to Americanize the CPUSA brought limited results as it “never became

¹³⁵ Pogány was called a “Hungarian Christopher Columbus,” and even the “American Lenin.” Benjamin Gitlow, *The Whole of Their Lives* (New York: Scribner, 1948), p. 109; Thomas Sakmyster, *A Communist Odyssey: The Life of József Pogány / John Pepper* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012), p. 115.

¹³⁶ Sakmyster, *A Communist Odyssey*, p. 82; John Pepper, “Problems of our Party IV. Be American!” *The Worker*, May 26, 1923, p. 5. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/cpusa/1923/05/0526-pepper-beamerican.pdf>

¹³⁷ Bertram Wolfe, “Whose Revolution Is It?” *The Workers Monthly* 5(9) (July 1926), p. 391.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 387. It can be noted that Wolfe refers to Lenin’s work under the title “What Inheritance Do We Reject,” and not “The Heritage We Renounce,” which suggests that the translation mentioned in the previous section did not exist at the time.

a large-scale campaign.”¹³⁹ Still, these early writings contained the seeds of some of the ideas of the Lovestone group that surfaced more prominently once they were expelled from the Stalinist party – ideas that extended the exceptionalist thinking into new understandings under the changed circumstances of the 1930s and 40s.

However, the immediate precursor of the exceptionalist discourse did not come from theoretical differences, but rather from parallel power struggles within the Moscow leadership and the CPUSA. After his showdown with the “leftism” of Trotsky and Zinoviev, Stalin turned against the “rightist deviationism” of Bukharin which resulted in a re-intensification of revolutionary rhetoric. Once again, Stalin used an ideological mask to hide his motives of consolidating power in his own hands: under the pretext that a “third period” had arrived in the post-war development (after the revolutionary period of 1917-23 was followed by a partial capitalist stabilization) which was manifested in the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism, he condemned Bukharin’s more modest goals outlined earlier, and advocated a “sharpening” of tactics throughout the West.¹⁴⁰ The American leadership had to decide how to adjust their previous positions to accommodate the new directives coming from Moscow, and in a series of articles published in 1928, Pepper argued that despite the “general tendency to the left,” American Communists “were facing a peculiar situation.” Pepper listed nine specific characteristics of America that hindered the progress of communism, including that “capitalism in America is still very strong and still on the upgrade scale;” or “the American working class as a whole is in a privileged position.”¹⁴¹ Later in the summer, during the Comintern’s Sixth

¹³⁹ Klehr, *The Theory of American Exceptionalism*, p. 117.

¹⁴⁰ Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, pp. 300-306; Kermit E. McKenzie, *Comintern and World Revolution* (London: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 122-123.

¹⁴¹ John Pepper, “America and the Tactics of the Communist International,” *The Communist* 7(4) (April 1928), pp. 223-225; John Pepper, “Certain Basic Questions of Our Perspective,” *The Communist* 7(5) (May 1928), p. 300.

World Congress, he was vehemently attacked and ridiculed for his “theory with its nine points” as it was becoming increasingly clear that Bukharin had fallen behind in the power struggle.¹⁴²

Back home, the internal opposition immediately exploited the situation even though Pepper had explicitly stated in an earlier article that “the guiding light in our consideration is Marxism,” and a Communist “can not and must not make an exception,” while Lovestone also later claimed that he had never denied that an economic crisis was “unavoidable in the future.”¹⁴³ Nevertheless, already in the Congress, the minority faction openly accused the leadership of giving “insufficient weight ... to the growing contradictions of American imperialism and the radicalization of the masses,” so they soon began lobbying Stalin for the removal of the Bukharin-friendly leaders.¹⁴⁴ They brought up and distorted a quote from Lovestone in which he cited an article from the *Magazine of Wall Street* that celebrated the “epoch of affluence and magnificence” of a new “Hooverian age” following Herbert Hoover’s electoral victory. In fact, Lovestone put this citation in a critical light, adding that the affluence was limited to “Wall Street” and to the imperialists, but it still did not prevent his opponents framing him an apologist of the American equivalent of the “Victorian era” of imperialism.¹⁴⁵ This was the context in which Earl Browder and Joseph Zack, in a January 1929 article, first described the “theory [that] pervades all the writings and the speeches of the Lovestone-Pepper group” as “American ‘exceptionalism,’” while attacking them because of the alleged “Right Danger.” Contrary to their “exceptionalist” views, Browder and Zack argued that

America is more and more becoming involved in the world crisis of capitalism. The “prosperity period” of 1923-27, exhausted the possibilities of expansion of the home market, which is now shrinking with every new technical advance. In the world market, American imperialism is ever more sharply encountering the limitations raised by rival imperialists, in the form of sharper price-competition as well as the form of colonial monopolies. [...] Therefore, further expansion leads inevitably to more drastic

¹⁴² Sakmyster, *A Communist Odyssey*, p. 178.

¹⁴³ John Pepper, “Why a Labor Party?” *The Workers Monthly* 5(3) (Jan. 1926), p. 99; Lovestone is quoted in: Klehr, “Leninism and Lovestoneism,” p. 16.

¹⁴⁴ “6th World Congress (July/Sept. 1928),” in: *The Communist International 1919-43: Documents*, vol. II, p. 448.

¹⁴⁵ Jay Lovestone, “Some Immediate Party Problems,” *The Communist* 7(7) (July 1928), p. 422.

attacks upon the living standards of the masses and to an attempt at the armed redivision of the world's markets. This is thus the period of approaching the apex of growth of American imperialism.

The foregoing factors are rapidly eliminating any "exceptional" features of American imperialism which might require a different tactical line from the C. I. [Comintern] in America: more and more do American problems fit in to the tactical world orientation of the C.I.¹⁴⁶

Although in a desperate and purely opportunistic move, Lovestone and Pepper attempted to distance themselves from Bukharin, Stalin still ordered their removal from the leadership of the CPUSA. However, the American Party – in a rare defiance of a Comintern directive – refused to follow the order during their next Congress, thus both factions were called back to Moscow in May 1929 to argue their case in front of an ad hoc "American commission."

In Moscow, Stalin had strong words against both the Lovestone group and its opposition, but ultimately, he claimed that, while it "would be wrong to ignore the specific peculiarities of American capitalism,"

it would be still more wrong to base the activities of the Communist Party on these specific features, since the foundation of the activities of every Communist party, including the American Communist Party, on which it must base itself, must be the general features of capitalism, which are the same for all countries, and not its specific features in any given country.¹⁴⁷

In a remarkable, probably truly "exceptional" event in the history of the Comintern, members of the majority faction decided to fight against the planned resolution, and openly disobeyed Stalin's will, only to provoke an angry outburst by Stalin.¹⁴⁸ Then, the final resolution condemned Lovestone for "playing an unprincipled game with the question of the struggle against the Right Danger." Moreover,

[t]he ideological lever of right errors in the American party was the so-called theory of "exceptionalism," which found its clearest exponents in the persons of Comrades Pepper and Lovestone whose conception was as follows: a crisis of capitalism, but not of American capitalism; a swing of the masses to the left, but not in America; the necessity of accentuating the struggle against reformism, but not in the United States; a necessity for struggle against the right danger, but not in the American Communist Party.

¹⁴⁶ Earl Browder and Joseph Zack, "Party Pre-Convention Discussion Section: The Right Danger and Trotskyism in America," *The Daily Worker*, January 29, 1929.

¹⁴⁷ Stalin is quoted in: Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, p. 409.

¹⁴⁸ Allegedly, Stalin was shouting at the Lovestoneites: "Who do you think you are? Trotsky defied me. Where is he? Zinoviev defied me. Where is he? Bukharin defied me. Where is he? ... When you get back to America, nobody will stay with you except for your wives." According to Lovestone, he even said that "[t]here is plenty of room in our cemeteries." Ibid., pp. 423-429.

According to the resolution, exceptionalism was

a reflection of the pressure of American capitalism and reformism which are endeavoring to create among the mass of workers an impression of absolute firmness and “exceptional” imperial might of American capital in spite of its growing crisis and to strengthen the tactic of class collaboration in spite of the accentuation of class contradictions.¹⁴⁹

In the end, the Lovestone group was expelled from the Communist Party, while Lovestone himself barely managed to escape from Moscow without the Comintern’s permit.¹⁵⁰ In one respect, Stalin was certainly right: back home, the CPUSA apparatus already adjusted its positions to the new Comintern line, and Lovestone’s splinter organization – first called *Communist Party (Majority Group)*, and later, more realistically, *Communist Party (Opposition)* – attracted only a fraction of party members. Party propaganda, even in such previously Pepper-controlled publications like the Hungarian-language *Új Előre*, now echoed the official argument about the “rightist mistake” of the “theory of exceptionalism,” which prevented any further intra-party contestation on the issue.¹⁵¹ However, the Lovestoneites – while initially remaining firmly Communists – defended their arguments in the 1930s, and kept alive the discourse about a version of Marxism potentially more suitable to American realities. Nevertheless, by the end of the decade, having failed to reconcile their differences with the Stalinists, many of them discarded communism, and ultimately Marxism as well.

¹⁴⁹ ‘Address of the Comintern to the Membership of the C.P.U.S.A’ in: *On the Road to Bolshevization* (New York: Workers Library, 1929), pp. 38-39.

¹⁵⁰ Not everyone was so lucky: not being an American citizen and fearing an extradition to Hungary, Pogány/Pepper could not return to the United States, and instead repented his “mistakes” in Russia, so he could continue to work in a lower-level position in the Soviet planning agency until he became one of the victims of Stalin’s purges in the late 1930s. Sakmyster, *A Communist Odyssey*, pp. 207-208.

¹⁵¹ In *Új Előre*, an article described the theory of “exceptionalism” (*kivételesség* in Hungarian) as the belief that “American imperialism is above world capitalism,” and condemned it as a “rightist mistake” influenced by the “enemy class.” Kövess Lajos, “Élesedő osztályharc felé” [To the sharpening class struggle], *Új Előre*, June 28, 1929, p. 6.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to introduce the context in which the expression “American exceptionalism” first arose, and to identify how this discourse framed the debates of U.S. Communists in the 1920s, while also showing what the actors *did by using* the term itself. In short, the invocation of exceptionalism helped to delineate the boundary between those who were “true believers” of the general laws of Marxism and those who – in the eyes of their critics – were skeptical of its omnipotent relevance; it was therefore used as a tool for exclusions within the movement by stigmatizing opponents. At the same time, this exclusionary practice also created a term which became a commonplace reference in discussions on the underdevelopment of socialist and communist movements in the United States, while, as time passed, it also directed attention to other supposedly unique U.S. circumstances and qualities.

First of all, it is without doubt that the use of exceptionalism as a derogatory term was *politically* motivated – in this sense, Klehr and Zumoff are right to highlight the overly opportunistic choice of positions on both sides of the American debate. Certainly, both sides moved within a narrow Leninist framework, or even followed the Stalinist “degeneration” of communism as Zumoff claims, and articulated their positions based on momentary interests in an intra-party power struggle. These positions were even interchangeable at a certain level: it is not without irony that the same Earl Browder who co-authored the article that first used “exceptionalism” as a slur against the Lovestone-Pepper faction and who was appointed by Stalin to lead the CPUSA in the 1930s, was expelled from the party on exactly identical grounds two decades later. Moreover, neither were the “Lovestoneites” principled opponents of Stalin: on the contrary, they had put him on a pedestal prior to their rebuke, and even following their expulsion they did not give up on winning back the trust of the Soviet leader initially. This certainly underscores the point that exceptionalism was not a well-thought-out theoretical

approach in the 1920s. However, it did not need to be in order to influence later discursive constructs about America's unique situation or specific global role. Again, in Skowronek's terms, we are looking less at a "coherent set of ideas" than the "common grammar" which allowed the redefinition of certain concepts and terms. In addition, even if we take into account the opportunistic elements of the political positions of Communist leaders (and Lovestone and Pepper gave plenty of reasons to view their behavior in this way), we cannot discard entirely that they believed sincerely at least some foundational presuppositions of what they preached. After all, to make a political career in the United States, Marxism was far from an obvious choice. The more or less sincere reminiscences made by the former leaders during their post-communist life also indicate that they took seriously to some extent what they argued publicly.¹⁵² Thus, these choices opened up possibilities on discussing the peculiarities of the American development while reflecting on the tension between universal principles and particular circumstances; in this way, the Communist discourse of exceptionalism *did* matter even if in a more direct manner, as Klehr correctly observes, they did not contribute to the "understanding of America."

To summarize the observations in the chapter, we can follow a more modest version of Guzzini's "time-layered interpretivist process model" as outlined in the Introduction.¹⁵³ As was seen there, five layers should be highlighted for our purposes (see Figure 1). On top, there is the level of *international structure* and events with world historic relevance. The time-period under investigation takes place between two major crises: after the end of World War I, which coincided with the repercussions of the Russian Revolution, and before the economic downturn of the Great Depression. In the examined discourses, the interpretations of these events

¹⁵² See: Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess: The Truth about American Communism* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1940); Bertram Wolfe, *A Life in Two Centuries: An Autobiography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1981). The transformations of Lovestone's views are traced in: Ted Morgan, *A covert life: Jay Lovestone, communist, anti-communist, and spymaster* (New York: Random House, 1999).

¹⁵³ See: Guzzini, "Social mechanisms as micro-dynamics in constructivist analysis," p. 273, Figure 11.3.

mattered: directly by how the post-war order was envisioned amid the perceived danger posed by the radicalism coming from Russia, and, more indirectly, by how a “future crisis” was interpreted in the Communist discourse related to the timing of the next crisis of (American) capitalism. The second layer is the level of *U.S. policy discourse*; focusing primarily on foreign policy, though in a broader understanding, in line with the presupposition that domestic and international policies cannot be entirely separated and always interact with each other. Here, of course, the qualification made in the Introduction is in place once again: we do not aim to present an overarching explanation of American policies or foreign policy; instead, those ideas and developments are noted in the framework that are relevant for the occurrence of exceptionalist discourse. Thus, the focus is on the failure of Wilsonian universalism, and the post-war move toward *particularist activism* manifested in the withdrawal from the League, in restrictionist immigration laws, and in the securitization of the “radical danger” through the “Red Scare.” The third level is the *radical leftist discourse* in America, the level where “American exceptionalism” appeared as a result of a tension between Marxist universalism and particular American conditions, which, in turn, were also impacted by changes on the policy level. But this discourse did not come from nowhere; thus the *ideational background* in the fourth layer matters, where Russian origins and the theory of uneven development can be noted. Furthermore, there is a fifth layer where *political struggles* come into picture, either in the case of the “treaty fight” which influenced the policy discourse (and outcome), or the intra-party (and the related Moscow) power struggle among Communists, which framed the context in which the debate on exceptionalism took place.

The interactions between these layers shed light on the process that enabled the appearance of the exceptionalist discourse within the world of American Communism, which soon broke away from its narrow partisan understanding. It is ironic that while these discussions took place within the CPUSA about America’s exceptional path, it was Soviet exceptionalism that

determined the Comintern's direction under Stalin. Furthermore, whereas "uneven development" was first evoked to justify the jump to socialism in an *underdeveloped* Russia, the reasoning went in the opposite way in the American case: American capitalism was perhaps *too developed* for a socialist revolution to occur. In some sense, Eric Foner made a similar observation decades later when he pondered that "[o]nly time will tell whether the United States has been behind Europe in the development of socialism, or ahead of it, in socialism's decline."¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Marxism remained the framework in which the exceptionalist discourse was advanced in the 1930s. Chapter 2 will explore this continuation of the discourse under the effects of the Great Depression, when Marxism unexpectedly was understood to be relevant for the United States by a wider group of intellectuals in an age filled with anxiety about economic conditions and even about the survival of democracy. Then, by the end of the chapter, we will see how these same intellectuals moved away from Marxism as their interest turned to foreign policy, and Chapter 3 addresses the shifts in their worldview amid World War II and the subsequent American long-term commitment to the post-war international order.

¹⁵⁴ Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?" p. 76.

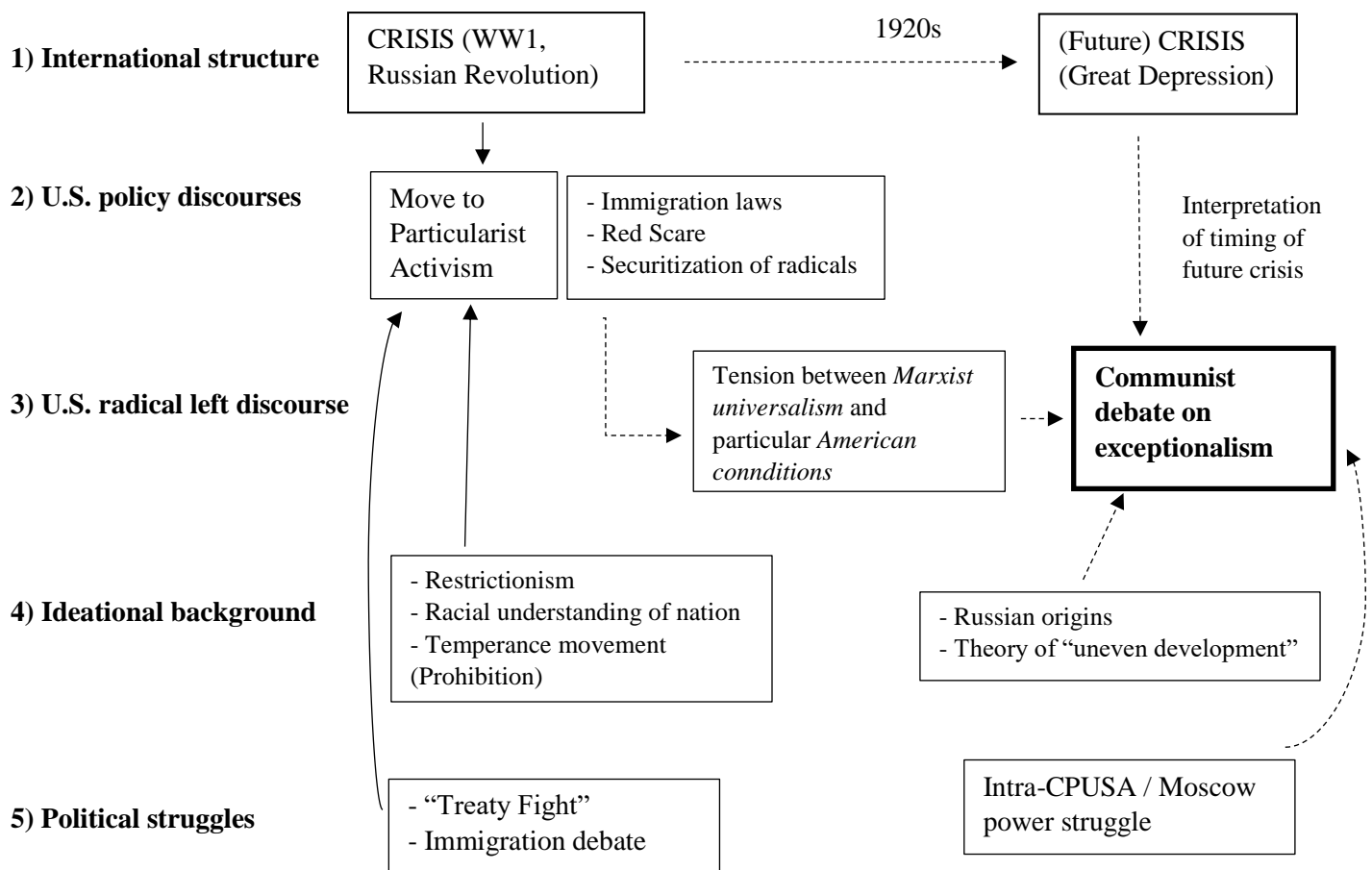


Figure 1. The discourse-tracing of American exceptionalism (1919-29).

Chapter 2 –

Crisis and Exception: Exceptionalism in America’s “Red Decade” (1929-41)

When Jay Lovestone and his associates were expelled from the American Communist Party for their alleged “heresy” of “American exceptionalism,” probably not even the Stalinist faction expected that the debate on the timing of the next crisis would be extremely relevant so soon. A few months later, stock market prices collapsed on Wall Street and the Great Depression began to unfold. The market crash solidified the Communist conviction that American capitalism was on the verge of collapse and social revolution was imminent; with the crisis unfolding, any thought on “American exceptionalism” was firmly repudiated and vanished for a while – at least, this was a reasonable expectation. However, the peculiarities of American conditions did not completely disappear from the discussions; on the contrary, even during this “red decade” of America, the unique developmental path of the United States was taken into consideration. Finally, “Americanization of Marxism” – which, as was shown in the previous chapter, had brought about very limited results in the twenties – became more than a slogan: various radical leftist groups found the American tradition while U.S. intellectuals also found Marxism for themselves. Resulting from the crisis, and because of the wider intellectual currents of the era, for a rare moment, Marxism, perceived as alien to American culture for most of its history, seemed to become part of the American mainstream: artists and scholars showed their sympathy to the Communist Party in large numbers, and even those who remained unaffected by the idea acknowledged its rising influence.

Nevertheless, the Depression cast doubt on America’s very distinctive qualities: as William E. Leuchtenburg noted, it “dealt a mean blow to America’s confidence in the uniqueness of its civilization,” and in Clinton Rossiter’s words, the “unusual grave condition” of the economy

made it “doubtful whether [America’s] vaunted powers of self-recuperation could bring it back to normal within any reasonable length of time.”¹⁵⁵ Retrospectively, Hans Morgenthau contemplated that “[l]arge masses of Americans experienced for the first time without escape or obvious remedy the economic stagnation, social immobility, political impotence, and the ever present threat of worse to come which had been the traditional condition of the masses of Europe;” therefore, the crisis “seemed to have made a mockery of the American purpose and put an end to the American experience itself.”¹⁵⁶ Less than two decades after Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that the world had to be made safe for democracy, its survival was called into question even in the United States.

How was it possible for exceptionalist arguments to return so forcefully after a decade when America’s supposedly unique qualities got questioned? What were the steps in the process in which a marginal leftist discourse made its way to mainstream intellectual discussions? In the following, I explore these questions while highlighting the relationship between crisis and exception: whereas each turn of the exceptionalist discourse was impacted by the perception of some crisis, the 1930s and early 40s, arguably, could be understood as a whole prolonged period of upheaval, which fundamentally altered America’s self-view, ultimately transforming its international behavior too. However, early on, it was far from clear that this transformation was to happen: Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal” was an activist though particularistic response to the Depression – while it must be understood in the context of the various national answers to the crisis, it did not follow any specific recipe, and it did not presuppose any universally relevant solution. Instead, Roosevelt implemented the New Deal in an experimental, “trial and error” fashion, while – especially in the first years of his presidency –

¹⁵⁵ William E. Leuchtenburg, “The Great Depression,” in: *The Comparative Approach to American History*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 297; Clinton Rossiter, *Constitutional Dictatorship: Crisis Government in Modern Democracies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p. 255.

¹⁵⁶ Hans Morgenthau, *The Purpose of American Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), p. 52.

he rather limited America's international involvement. In this period, the radical leftist discourse was predominantly hostile to the New Deal: rejecting its "patchwork" program from a universalistic Marxist point of view, they advocated a more revolutionary approach albeit with the recognition of America's special conditions. Nonetheless, by the end of the decade, it became increasingly clear for many on the left that the United States *was* an exception to the rule of the rise of dictatorial regimes throughout the world; the disillusionment with Marxism soon elicited a re-interpretation of American uniqueness.

In the framework of my overall argument, this chapter can be conceived in two ways. On the one hand, it can be seen as an important though *transitional* stage: a period in between the first articulation of American exceptionalism in the narrow Communist context and the broader understanding of the term construed in justifying a post-war international involvement. The radical discourse of the 1930s, in this sense, kept alive the idea of uniqueness while the radicals themselves slowly moved away from their strictly partisan point of view. On the other hand, we can also say that this *is* a crucial building bloc in the understanding of the transformation of the exceptionalist thought: without the parallel crises triggered by the Depression in the United States and throughout the world, the discourse certainly would have moved in a different direction. Therefore, in the following, I begin by highlighting the context in which these discussions took place, focusing on the New Deal as a particularistic response to the challenges of the era. The second section explores the radical leftist arguments when Marxism remained an overarching framework, though its "Americanization" directed attention to homegrown traditions and local conditions. Then, the third section shows how the changing international context – first and foremost, the rise of fascism, but also the increasingly recognized brutality of Stalinism in the Soviet Union – paved the way for the disillusionment of the left with Communism and soon with Marxism more generally, leading to appreciations of America as the "democratic exception" in an age of dictatorships.

Even though Franklin D. Roosevelt served in the Wilson administration and adhered to many of the Wilsonian positions,¹⁵⁷ as the newly elected president, he accepted the nationalistic atmosphere of the time and embraced a more particularistic approach to policies, at least in the initial stages of the New Deal. Although, as we will see, the New Deal indeed proved to be a sharp break in many important respects from previous administrations, there are also significant continuities: foreign policy remained secondary to the domestic agenda, while its main objective – to keep the United States as insulated as possible from international turbulence – was similarly unchanged. The aims of this section are threefold. First, it sets up the context in which the leftist discourses took place which will be dealt with in the rest of the chapter. Second, it highlights the experimental nature of the New Deal response to the crisis, and puts it into the perspective of the enduring questions on American uniqueness. The point here is that while Roosevelt's program was indeed influenced by foreign examples, it did not follow any universal framework; moreover, in a deeply ambivalent way, the expansion of the federal government created a new sense of nationhood but also raised the issue whether America was losing some of its peculiar characteristics exactly because of this. For the left, the New Deal was an insufficient remedy, while right-wing critics deplored it as “un-American” and deemed it as a road to socialism. Third, the section locates the early years of FDR's foreign policy as a continuation of the previous Republican presidencies: with domestic policies taking center-stage, Roosevelt did not have enough room for maneuver in this area; thus, he maintained a particularistic-activist approach to international crises. Eventually, FDR changed course, but

¹⁵⁷ For instance, in a 1928 *Foreign Affairs* article, FDR praised Wilson for a foreign policy that “marked the restoration of high moral purpose in our international relationships.” While recognizing the case for reservations against full membership, Roosevelt also advocated for stronger ties with the League of Nations and the World Court. Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Our Foreign Policy: A Democratic View,” *Foreign Affairs* 6(4) (July 1928), p. 575.

this happened only when war had already broken out in Europe, which will be further elaborated in Chapter 3.

The Great Depression added a temporal dimension to discussions of order and exception: it was widely believed that the “exceptional” times demanded extraordinary measures, and – as the crisis deepened internationally – it was not even clear whether a return to “normal” times was possible at all. Furthermore, in an era dominated by *fear* and *anxiety*, there was more at stake than the future of the economic order; the Depression, as Kiran Klaus Patel notes, “was not just a crisis of capitalism and laissez-faire more specifically but also of existing political orders,” and, primarily, of liberal democracy.¹⁵⁸ In Germany’s Weimar Republic, the jurist Carl Schmitt already predicted the failure of the mechanistic solutions of parliamentary democracy in the 1920s; with the Depression unfolding, the question was raised more generally whether liberal democracy could provide adequate solutions to the challenges of the modern age. All over the Western world, doubt was cast on the viability of this political model; in America, the prominent Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr was worried that “western society [was] obviously in the process of disintegration,” while William Ernest Hocking, a philosopher at Harvard, declared that liberal democracy “ha[d] no future.”¹⁵⁹

Then, as Franklin D. Roosevelt entered office in 1933, it was openly discussed whether a temporally limited “constitutional dictatorship” was necessary to combat the crisis. The influential columnist Walter Lippmann advocated for “extraordinary powers” and a temporary suspension of normal politics, and even though there were some dissenting voices, it was widely agreed that some form of emergency powers was indeed necessary to deal with the

¹⁵⁸ Kiran Klaus Patel, *The New Deal: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 45. On the lasting perceptions of fear in the era, see: Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, pp. 29-57.

¹⁵⁹ Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, pp. 114-115.

emergency situation.¹⁶⁰ Even Roosevelt himself, while rejecting extraconstitutional authority by saying that action was “feasible under the form of government which we have inherited from our ancestors,” nevertheless made it clear in his inauguration address that he took seriously the extent of the emergency and that he would interpret broadly the “simple and practical” constitutional powers “to meet extraordinary needs by changes in emphasis or arrangement” if necessary.¹⁶¹ In the end, Roosevelt’s practice indeed remained within the limits of constitutionality, though his inclination to test the boundaries of the accepted written and unwritten norms was manifested in his (ultimately unsuccessful) court-packing attempt and in his unprecedented run for a third (and fourth) presidential term. More importantly, as Katznelson notes, while “the United States provided the globe’s only major example of a liberal democracy successfully experimenting and resisting radical tyranny, it did not – indeed could not – remain unaffected by its associations with totalitarian governments or domestic racism.”¹⁶² Roosevelt could not become a dictator: he was constrained by the Supreme Court, by Congress, and even by his own party, whose Southern wing did not support New Deal policies unless they maintained the South’s racial order. This undoubtedly tainted the president’s achievements, but he still managed to reinterpret the role of the American state without dismantling constitutional forms, which was almost unparalleled in his time.

For this to be achieved, the New Deal had to respond somehow to the twin dangers of fascism and communism; hence, Roosevelt’s economic advisor, Stuart Chase suggested a “third road” and others made similar references to a “third course” or “middle way.”¹⁶³ In practice, this meant a major expansion of the state, which included planning, but remained distinct from its

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 117-119; For dissenting views, see: “Do We Need a Dictator?” *The Nation*, March 1, 1933, p. 22. Cf. Rossiter, *Constitutional dictatorship*. For Lippmann’s views, see also: Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and company, 1980), pp. 299-301. According to Steel, Lippmann even told FDR at a personal meeting that he “may have no alternative but to assume dictatorial powers.”

¹⁶¹ Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, p. 121; Franklin D. Roosevelt, *First Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1933. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/froos1.asp

¹⁶² Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, p. 9.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 118; Patel, *The New Deal*, p. 47.

totalitarian versions by stressing the need for experimentation and improvisation. According to Richard Hofstadter, the New Deal differed substantially from previous reformist movements in America as it lacked their ideological fervor and concentrated on the “opportune and managerial spirit in the field of political reform;” its success, ultimately, was “the triumph of economic emergency and human needs over inherited notions and inhibitions.”¹⁶⁴ In this sense, this was a particularistic response to the crisis instead of following universalist recipes. As Patel notes, in the beginning, the term “New Deal” itself was “largely devoid of content” except of a general recognition that “something had gone fundamentally wrong with capitalism, and government should take more responsibility for overcoming the prevailing adversity.”¹⁶⁵ Thus, there were important connections to the contemporaneous currents appearing all over the world: certainly specific solutions were influenced by foreign examples, but these did not signify the execution of a prescribed program. While, in contrast with Hoover’s reliance on “American solutions,” Roosevelt “had fewer illusions about America’s uniqueness,” his pragmatism also provided a shield from the more doctrinaire approaches that characterized both left- and right-wing dictatorships; “in comparison with other industrial countries, the economic and political answers given by the New Dealers usually straddled the middle.”¹⁶⁶

Nevertheless, in important ways, the New Deal represented a sharp break with previous policies, even to the extent that it can be seen as the re-creation (and in many respects, the creation for the first time) of an *American* state. The federal government had rapidly expanded: in less than two decades, federal spending showed a sixfold increase, amounting to 20 percent

¹⁶⁴ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, pp. 307-316. Quotes are from pp. 310 and 316.

¹⁶⁵ Patel, *The New Deal*, p. 48.

¹⁶⁶ Leuchtenburg, “The Great Depression,” p. 300; Patel, *The New Deal*, p. 3. For international connections and comparisons, especially with the totalitarian systems, see also: Patel, *The New Deal*, esp. pp. 66-70; 90-97; 114-120; Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, pp. 51-57; 92-95. Patel notes that “[i]ronically, ... transnational learning and linking mainly served as a means to find a better national solution to the double crisis of democracy and capitalism,” (p. 114) which reinforces our point about the particularist emphasis of the early New Deal.

of the GNP by 1941.¹⁶⁷ Even though a sense of nationhood was already strengthened in the aftermath of the Civil War, and while the Progressive era in many ways foreshadowed later state-building developments, the rise of the government was now so unprecedented that it was even contested whether it was in line with earlier American traditions.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, while combatting the crisis, Roosevelt consistently employed a metaphor of war, which – in line with the Tillyean understanding of state-formation – reinforced the idea that together with the Civil War and World War I, the Great Depression became a crucial formative period for nationhood.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, the *Civilian Conservation Corps* (CCC) which enlisted hundreds of thousands of unemployed young people for public works, arguably also created an “Americanizing” experience similar to the military service by “pulling boys loose from their local ties, familiarizing them with the nation’s wholeness and grandeur, and forging a sense of nationhood out of diverse ethnic, regional, and class identities.”¹⁷⁰ Thus, national self-consciousness was bolstered, which, for the first time, also resulted in the frequent use of expressions such as the “American way of life,” reinforcing the “effort to seek and define America as a culture.”¹⁷¹

Paradoxically, the buildup of an *American* state also elicited a response that questioned the “Americanness” of the New Deal. Especially on the right, it was argued that Roosevelt’s

¹⁶⁷ Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 47.

¹⁶⁸ On the aftermath of the Civil War, see: Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan*. For Progressive era state-building and its precursors, see: Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

¹⁶⁹ Tilly, of course, famously said that “[w]ar made the state, and the state made war.” Charles Tilly, “Reflections on the history of European state-making,” in: *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), ed. Charles Tilly, p. 42. On the war analogy theme in the early New Deal period, see: Sherry, *In the Shadow of War*, pp. 15-21. See also: Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, p. 77.

¹⁷⁰ Sherry, *In the Shadow of War*, p. 21. However, one important limitation of the CCC’s “creation of nationhood” was that it continued to segregate African Americans. See: Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, p. 160; and his *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold Story of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), p. 27. See also: Patel, *The New Deal*, pp. 85-90.

¹⁷¹ Warren Sussman is quoted in Sherry, *In the Shadow of War*, p. 23. Sherry notes that these efforts “gained energy from the insecurity that the Depression bred and the resulting desire to find an anchor in a common past.”

program contradicted a foundational element of the American tradition, namely, the *absence* of the state; some even saw it as a move toward socialism – therefore, as pointed out previously, “un-American” and fundamentally alien to the United States – even though socialists themselves were also dissatisfied with its gradual achievements. Meanwhile, Southern Democrats, a crucial building bloc of the New Deal coalition, prevented any reform that threatened their own racial order, thus maintaining the racialized understanding of the American nation. In Chapter 1, we have already seen how the particularism of the 1920s was manifested in protectionism and immigration restrictionism amid a rising climate of xenophobia and religious intolerance. Thus, the exclusionary discourses did not appear with the Depression; there was already a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.¹⁷² Nevertheless, the social strains resulting from the crisis gave a new impetus to extremist movements. In this respect, the United States was no exception to the general worldwide trend. Extremism took many forms: the openly nativist or even protofascist successor organizations to the Klan, like the Black Legion and the Silver Shirts, remained relatively small (though vocal) groups; while populists like the controversial governor and later senator from Louisiana, Huey Long, and the Catholic priest Charles Coughlin, who reached millions through his popular radio program, gained a much larger following. Long and Coughlin were originally supporters of the New Deal, but they turned against the president’s agenda by the mid-1930s. Long, before he was assassinated in 1935, had been planning to challenge Roosevelt in the 1936 election. His “Share the Wealth” movement was seen by many as a possible turn toward an American version of the fascist path – reportedly inspiring Sinclair Lewis’s satirical novel *It Can’t Happen Here*.¹⁷³ After Long died, the remnants of his movement allied with Coughlin to form the Union Party, but despite their claims of having several millions of followers, their

¹⁷² Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, pp. 294-296.

¹⁷³ But for major distinctions between European fascism and Long/Coughlin, see: Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), pp. 276-283.

presidential candidate received less than two percent of the votes. Following the election, Coughlin more openly embraced fascism, claiming that democracy was no longer working in the United States, as he joined forces with the pro-Nazi *German American Bund* and intensified his anti-Semitic rhetoric (which had been present from the beginning: even as a supporter of Roosevelt, he propagated conspiracy theories about the Jewish role in instigating the Great Depression).¹⁷⁴ Despite the domestic turbulences that they caused and despite the sarcastic suggestion to the contrary in the title of Lewis's novel, the direct appeal and influence of these groups remained limited; in the end, *it really did not* happen there. At the same time, the far-right discourse – though by magnifying and taking to the extreme those views – *did* represent more deep-seated sentiments in American society, which considerably constrained Roosevelt's available policy options. Nowhere was this clearer than in the realm of foreign policy.

Even though Roosevelt's Wilsonian beliefs were apparent in his pre-presidential declarations such as in his 1928 *Foreign Affairs* piece, and despite Tony Smith's characterization of him as the “modern embodiment of traditional American liberal internationalism,” his whole tenure shows a more complicated picture.¹⁷⁵ In many ways, especially during his first two terms, he continued the activist-particularist path of his Republican predecessors; in some cases, he even backpedaled on the limited internationalist attempts made by Hoover to overcome the crisis. For instance, the hopes raised by his commitment to the World Economic Conference in London (originally initiated by Hoover) a few months after his inauguration soon led to disappointment, as it became clear that domestic concerns were prioritized to global leadership, and the American position “reveal[ed] that economic nationalism and globalization are not polar opposites, but that their relationship is much more complex.”¹⁷⁶ Even when Roosevelt

¹⁷⁴ Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 150-202; Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, pp. 56-57; Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), ch. 12, “America First 1935-1939: It Can Happen Here;” Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, p. 275.

¹⁷⁵ Roosevelt, “Our Foreign Policy: A Democratic View;” Smith, *America's Mission*, p. 114.

¹⁷⁶ Patel, *The New Deal*, pp. 122-131, quote is from p. 130.

avored internationalism, as in the case of American participation in the World Court, he was reluctant to push it through the Senate: the proposal fell short of the required two-thirds majority amid the president's half-hearted lobbying for acceptance as he did not want to alienate progressive but more isolationist senators.¹⁷⁷ In his early years, American activism also fell behind in debt restructuring and disarmament. Of course, it is fair to say that the effects of the Depression and Hitler's rise to power in Germany would have made it much more difficult for any such effort to succeed compared to the twenties; still, these developments, together with the Neutrality Acts accepted in Congress that Roosevelt reluctantly signed, arguably moved the United States closer to the "withdrawal" position.¹⁷⁸

At the same time, some foreign policy decisions, such as the opening of diplomatic connections with the Soviet Union and the "Good Neighbor" policy in the American continent, imply that we cannot speak of a wholesale isolationist turn even in the first years of Roosevelt's presidency. How then should we characterize his position? Even Smith argues that FDR infused realism with his general inclination toward liberal internationalism, while Robert Dallek, one of the most prominent historians of the foreign policy of the era, suggests that Roosevelt's internationalism can be divided into phases when it was masked as nationalism,

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 137-138. Charles Coughlin and the Hearst media advocates were leading proponents of remaining outside of the Court, and their strong campaign in the end succeeded. Churchwell, *Behold, America*, ch. 12.

¹⁷⁸ For debts and disarmament, see: Patel, *The New Deal*, pp. 131-139. On the Neutrality Acts, see: Patel, *The New Deal*, pp. 167-171; Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, pp. 291-299. For a different interpretation of the Neutrality Acts, see: Braumoeller, "The Myth of American Isolationism," pp. 359-360; and Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 142. Certainly, Braumoeller and – based on his account – Restad correctly point out that the neutrality laws had proponents with very different intentions: some wanted to limit international involvement, while others "sought to strengthen the President's ability to sanction aggressors." (Braumoeller, p. 359.) Nevertheless, from Katznelson's account, it is clear that initially the major concern was "foreign entanglement" and the advocates of the law wanted to prevent the repetition of World War I when, as Huey Long claimed, the U.S. was "being drawn" into the conflict. (Katznelson, p. 292.) Furthermore, later developments also show that the sanctions in the laws were inadequate to punish aggressors, and in the case of the conflict between Japan and China, "only by not invoking neutrality could the United States actually stay neutral, for the operation of the law clearly would have worked to the benefit of Japan by making any help of arms or credit to China impossible." (Katznelson, p. 296.)

isolationism, and realism.¹⁷⁹ Restad believes that the era was dominated by “neutral nationalism” which was distinct from isolationism and foreshadowed a later turn toward “unilateralist internationalism,” while Patel prefers the word “insulation” to isolation (or internationalism) to define the Roosevelt administration’s original approach to international relations.¹⁸⁰ There is at least a modicum of truth in all of these (even if they also contradict each other somewhat), but for our objectives it makes sense to return to our two-dimensional representation of views about America’s global role (universalism vs. particularism and activism vs. withdrawal) and to the debates of the time. In the end, Roosevelt’s position can only be understood and located within this table if we also consider the alternatives that arose in contemporaneous public discourse.

The lower-right cell of the table contained the position that American values are not universally applicable, thus it was not necessary or even desirable to maintain an active international posture. “One hundred percent Americanists,” “America Firsters” and other far-right and populist groups mentioned above can be listed here: by definition, they were using particularist rhetoric, while their foreign policy views, by and large, can be characterized as isolationist.¹⁸¹ This is also where we can put Father Coughlin, who orchestrated the media campaign against the World Court, and Huey Long, who rejected American participation under these thinly veiled racist terms:

I do not intend to have these gentlemen whose names I cannot even pronounce, let alone spell, passing upon the rights of the American people. I do not intend to have the affairs of this country meddled in by various and sundry men from the four corners of the Orient, telling us what is and what is not an American policy.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Smith, *America’s Mission*, pp. 114-118; Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981)

¹⁸⁰ Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 139-143; Patel, *The New Deal*, p. 121.

¹⁸¹ This was, of course, partly due to the particular circumstances in which the United States seemed to have the option to isolate itself from European/global developments. Pro-Nazi groups would also have been more “activist” if Nazi Germany had been closer to the United States, but because of the distance, they could not count on direct support, so they rather preferred limited involvement. See: Churchwell, *Behold, America*, ch. 12. See also the footnote below on “isolationism.”

¹⁸² Quoted in: Patel, *The New Deal*, p. 138.

While this quote primarily highlights the particularist (and unilateralist) assumptions in Long's views, his support for the committee led by Gerald Nye, Republican senator from North Dakota, investigating the role of financial interests in America's entry to World War I, and his participation in the push toward a mandatory neutrality law underscores his preference for non-involvement.¹⁸³ Therefore, Long, Nye, and other "isolationist" senators such as William Borah, the veteran "irreconcilable" of Wilson's treaty fight, fall into the particularist-withdrawal category.¹⁸⁴

In the lower-left ("universalism-withdrawal") quadrant, we can find the pacifists, including most of the socialists of the time (though the Communist Party, as we will see later, changed its positions according to the swings of Soviet policy interests). Even though some recognized the looming danger of fascism, most of them believed that the forthcoming European conflict would be an "imperialist war," thus the United States should remain unaffected. Indeed, the end of the decade saw a peculiar alliance between left- and right-wing isolationists advocating

¹⁸³ Dallek, *FDR and American Foreign Policy*, p. 108; "Demand to Vote U.S. Neutrality Now Halts the Rush of Bills in Congress; London Acts Tomorrow on Ethiopia," *The New York Times*, August 21, 1935, p. 1.

¹⁸⁴ There is some contestation in the literature about the use of the terms "isolationist" and "isolationism." These words first appeared scatteredly in the debates of the Spanish-American War and then during the post-World War I treaty fight, but they only became prevalent in the 1930s – and even then, it was mostly used as a slur against self-declared opponents of "foreign entanglements," thus there is some similarity with the development of "exceptionalism." (*The New York Times* only has 3 mentions of "isolationism" in the 1920s, but by 1933, it appeared dozens of times – though "isolationist" already had several mentions in the early 1920s, particularly in connection with Borah and other "irreconcilables.") Restad argues that proponents of non-entanglement were not (necessarily) isolationists, as Borah himself had been an advocate of the Washington Naval Conference and the Kellogg-Briand Pact in the 1920s, which would mean that he "was against entanglements yet favored an active foreign policy." Also, while they indeed wanted to keep the U.S. out of the European war, in other relations, they were expansionists. Thus, their position can rather be regarded as "hemispheric" or "geographically limited internationalism." Even if this is the case, Borah's activism in the 1920s does not exclude a more inward-looking position in the 1930s. After all, our categorization intends to locate intellectual positions rather than actors who, in real life, can change their views and all represent some combination of different beliefs. In the 1930s, the most important issue of global relevance was the European situation, thus even if they were activist in the Western hemisphere, the proponents of non-entanglement indeed favored terms similar to "withdrawal" (or "insulation" in Patel's words) to justify their position – certainly this was why their contemporaries characterized them as "isolationist." After all, this was an era when a proposed constitutional amendment ("Ludlow Amendment") about requiring a referendum on declarations of war was kept alive in the public discourse for years. Therefore, in the large debates of the thirties, these positions can be put in the "particularist-withdrawal" cell. Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 61; 140-141. See also: Braumoeller, "The Myth of American Isolationism," pp. 359-360, but see: Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, pp. 291-292; Patel, *The New Deal*, pp. 168-169.

for American non-involvement in European affairs from different standpoints; while the right intensified the “America First” rhetoric, on the left, the *Keep America Out of the War Congress* (formed in 1938) believed that a war against fascism would itself destroy democracy and would “bring fascist dictatorship at home.”¹⁸⁵ Principled pacifism was also the initial position of Reinhold Niebuhr in the 1920s who slowly moved toward greater activism, becoming one of the leading advocates of American intervention by 1941.

Meanwhile, Roosevelt, as was mentioned already, mainly continued the activist-particularist path of his predecessors. In his first years as president, he gave priority to the domestic programs of the New Deal, and his foreign policy agenda remained secondary. His policies were also ambivalent in the areas of trade and immigration, highlighted in Chapter 1 as the most apparent domains of particularism under the Republicans of the 1920s. To be sure, FDR and – especially – his Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, were committed to free trade, and they made efforts to overturn the heavy burdens prescribed by the controversial Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act. But, at least initially, this issue was not prioritized by the administration. Nevertheless, the 1934 Reciprocal Trade Agreement Act paved the way for substantial decreases of tariffs with Latin American nations, essentially leading to the rise of regionalism in American foreign policy – though still not universalism.¹⁸⁶ On immigration, Roosevelt did little to change the course of the restrictionist policies of the 1920s. Even as it was becoming increasingly clear that Jewish people were threatened in Germany and later in other countries

¹⁸⁵ Justus D. Doenecke, “Non-interventionism of the Left: The Keep America Out of the War Congress, 1938-41,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 12(2) (Apr. 1971), p. 226. See also on the cooperation between leftists and the Charles Lindbergh-led “America First Committee”: Geoffrey S. Smith, *To Save A Nation: American Countersubversives, the New Deal and the Coming of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 172-181.

¹⁸⁶ Patel, *The New Deal*, pp. 121, 151; Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, pp. 261-264; Smith, *America’s Mission*, p. 120. Robert Dallek concludes that “[w]hatever Roosevelt’s or Hull’s intentions, the reciprocal trade program chiefly served American rather than world economic interests. Still, as writers on the subject have concluded, it was a less nationalistic program than those pursued by other countries in the thirties, and it helped set the nations on the road to freer trade.” Dallek, *FDR and American Foreign Policy*, p. 93.

as well, the president was constrained by a strongly anti-Semitic public opinion and a vocal far-right which called his program a “Jew Deal” because of the origins of many of his advisors.¹⁸⁷ While not resigning from activism in some areas (especially in hemispheric relations, but also in the establishment of diplomatic connections with the Soviet Union, and in the participation of many League initiatives), but acquiescing to certain limitations such as the Neutrality Acts under intense congressional and public pressure, Roosevelt’s position in most of the 1930s can indeed be characterized as activism and particularism.

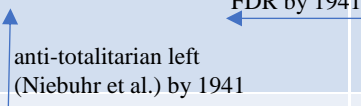
As this brief overview shows (see Table 5), the universalist-activist field was conspicuously empty during this period; openly embracing Wilsonianism was not a popular position for politicians, nor among intellectuals. Still, as the situation in Europe became more critical, some movement to this direction happened by the end of the decade. A growing group of anti-communist intellectuals on the left, including Niebuhr and even some former Communists, turned toward activism and intervention leaving their initial “universalism-withdrawal” stance behind. The rest of the chapter will deal with the development of their thinking. At the same time, Roosevelt moved closer to universalism, first in such rhetoric as appeared in his famous “Quarantine Speech,” then with his incremental steps to disarm his non-interventionist congressional opponents, finally culminating in the lofty aims outlined in the *Atlantic Charter*.¹⁸⁸ Ultimately, Roosevelt and an anti-totalitarian left found each other in an increasingly universalist-activist position, but this only happened in the debates of 1940-41 as we will see in the next chapter.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Patel, *The New Deal*, pp. 171-176. Still, Roosevelt made efforts to organize international cooperation for aiding Jewish refugees, most famously by convening the 1938 Évian conference, which primarily demonstrated the limits of international intervention in a hostile climate. For evaluations of Roosevelt’s mixed record, see: Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, pp. 270-292; Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), esp. pp. 100-124.

¹⁸⁸ Patel, *The New Deal*, pp. 169-170; Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, pp. 295-316; Dallek, *FDR and American Foreign Policy*, pp. 148-151; Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, chapter 1, “The Ghost of Woodrow Wilson”

¹⁸⁹ Of course, this does not mean that the later views of either Roosevelt or such intellectuals as Niebuhr can unequivocally be characterized as universalism; there are still important particularist aspects, as we will see later – essentially, this is where exceptionalism comes into the picture.

Table 5. Positions in the 1930s.

	Universalism	Particularism
Activism	 anti-totalitarian left (Niebuhr et al.) by 1941	Hoover; FDR
Withdrawal	Pacifists; socialist non-interventionists	“America Firsters;” “isolationists” (Coughlin, Long, Nye, Borah)

Americanizing Marx: Radicals Re-Interpret America amid the Crisis

Within a few months after the expulsion of the “Lovestoneites” from the American Communist Party, the crisis began to unfold, thus new party secretary Earl Browder could easily ridicule the former leaders for their “famous theories of exceptionalism.”¹⁹⁰ In Browder’s eyes, Lovestone’s new organization – then called *Communist Party (Majority Group)* – and their new party organ, the *Revolutionary Age* were in fact “counterrevolutionary,” even though the expelled Communists remained firm believers in Stalin, still hoping that one day they would regain their leadership role in the CPUSA – or at least readmission to the party. The Depression put the Lovestone group on the defensive: they denied ever questioning that capitalism would eventually collapse in the United States, so they attempted to counter the “unfounded accusation of ‘exceptionalism’” by claiming that their interpretation was the true Leninist understanding of American conditions. In a late 1929 *Revolutionary Age* editorial, they defended the “exceptionalist” statements by recalling the theory of uneven development as they

¹⁹⁰ Earl Browder, “Lovestone Ends His ‘Isolation,’” *The Daily Worker* (Dec. 23, 1929).
<https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/cpusa/1929/12/1223-browder-loveends.pdf>

argued that if their position was “‘exceptionalism’ and ‘opportunism’ then certainly Lenin was an ‘exceptionalist’ on the first water.”¹⁹¹

Subsequently, Bertram Wolfe also used a quotation from Lenin in a 1932 article to highlight that even the Russian leader had emphasized the “nationally peculiar, nationally specific features” of communist development,¹⁹² while a year later he elaborated his analysis in a three-part series titled *Marx and America* in V. F. Calverton’s independent Marxist journal, *The Modern Monthly*. Here Wolfe went further in his (self-)criticism than previously, and, in an appraisal of the “discovery” of America within the Marxist tradition, he conceded that the failure of American Marxists was due to their inability to “make a realistic analysis of American conditions, of the specific national characteristics and peculiarities of the country in which they sought to give to their correct general theory concrete application.”¹⁹³ Instead, he suggested a reappraisal based on Marx’s and Engels’s fragmentary writings on America as he claimed that the “official theoreticians of American communism do not at present seem to grasp the necessity for such an analysis and condemn the very planting of the problem as ‘American exceptionalism.’”¹⁹⁴ This was still a limited understanding of exceptionalism, though it indicates a move within the Lovestone group to reinterpret their position and to leave behind the doctrinaire approach to American uniqueness. Nevertheless, as an early 1935 letter written by Lovestone to Browder testifies, the “Opposition” still wanted to negotiate their re-entry to the Stalinist party: Lovestone claimed in it that “the whole smokescreen of misrepresentation

¹⁹¹ “Declaration to the Plenum of the C.C.,” *Revolutionary Age* 1(1) (Nov. 1, 1929), p. 5. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/revolutionary-age/v1n01-nov-01-1929.pdf>; “‘Exceptionalism’ and Leninist strategy,” *Revolutionary Age* 1(4) (Dec. 15, 1929), p. 6. See also: Robert J. Alexander, *The Right Opposition: The Lovestoneites and the International Communist Opposition of the 1930’s* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), pp. 114-115.

¹⁹² Bertram D. Wolfe, “Building a Communist Party in the U.S.A: Questions of Exceptionalism,” *Workers Age* 2(1), October 15, 1932, p. 7.

¹⁹³ Bertram D. Wolfe, “Marx and America,” *Modern Monthly* 7(7) (Aug. 1933), p. 432. (The series was later republished as a separate pamphlet with the same title.)

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 433.

and distortion” about the accusation of “exceptionalism” had to be swept away, though he also called on Browder for “self-criticism” regarding this question. (The plea for readmission to the party was, of course, unsuccessful.)¹⁹⁵

The Depression, however, also led to a more extensive rethinking of the relationship between Marxist theory and realities in the United States, and Calverton’s journal, *The Modern Monthly* (founded as *Modern Quarterly*) came to play a major role in this. Initially, Calverton started from the same Leninist idea of uneven development as the Lovestoneites. Nevertheless, as the 1930s advanced, he became preoccupied with the idea that a leftist program needed to reflect the unique conditions in America, and – in the words of his biographer, Leonard Wilcox – “Calverton’s interest in Americanizing Marx led him further in search of a usable past, an indigenous radicalism rooted in the American tradition.”¹⁹⁶ In the end, the debate was one of the factors that pushed Calverton, as well as many others who were involved in the discussions, away from Communism, and ultimately from Marxism as well.

Calverton was not alone, of course, in advocating for the Americanization of Marx. Lewis Corey, a Marxist economist, who was known by his original name, Louis Fraina, as one of the founders of the American Communist Party, later recalled that he had “discovered America” between 1923 and 1929 as he gradually moved away from the party, and finally, America’s “democratic life ... helped him cast aside his own ideological glasses.”¹⁹⁷ In the 1930s, Corey was a frequent contributor to Calverton’s magazine, where they shared a commitment to “analyze the American scene in American terms,” while still advocating for a radical, possibly

¹⁹⁵ Jay Lovestone to Earl Browder, ‘Letter from Communist Opposition to Communist Party,’ January 4, 1935, in: *Where We Stand vol. 4: Programmatic Documents of the Communist Party (Opposition)* (New York: The Communist Party (Opposition), 1935), p. 44. <https://archive.org/details/WhereWeStandVolume4>

¹⁹⁶ Leonard Wilcox, *V. F. Calverton: Radical in the American Grain* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 157-176, quote is from p. 158. See also: Michael Nash, “Schism on the Left: The Anti-Communism of V. F. Calverton and his *Modern Quarterly*,” *Science & Society* 45(4) (Winter 1981/82), pp. 437-452.

¹⁹⁷ Paul Buhle, *A Dreamer’s Paradise Lost: Louis C. Fraina/Lewis Corey and the decline of radicalism in the United States* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1995), p. 125.

revolutionary program as “the only way out” of the crisis.¹⁹⁸ Their major dilemma was still to explain the underdevelopment of American socialism; but their responses inevitably differed from the earlier articulations. After all, it was difficult to argue that American capitalism was still on an upward path as the Depression unfolded. Corey and Calverton believed that the outbreak of the revolution was necessary. However, they claimed that unique American conditions made the traditional working class unable to play their historic role, and thus they called for closer cooperation between the middle class and industrial workers. In a 1932 pamphlet, Calverton claimed that even though America faced a “potentially revolutionary” situation, its working class was “ideologically unequipped to take revolutionary action.”¹⁹⁹ Therefore, his magazine explicitly targeted the “professional workers” (especially the intellectuals), and Corey’s attention was also directed to the problems of the middle class. In 1935, he published his book *The Crisis of the Middle Class*, in which he was still sympathetic to Communism – he could still justify a “communist dictatorship” that is “wholly functional and temporary,” – but he believed in a distinguished role of a new middle class of salaried employees shaped by “conditions peculiar to the New World.”²⁰⁰

These ideas, of course, substantially differed from the doctrinaire positions of the Communist Party, thus, it is not surprising that the followers of the Stalinist line were hostile to the program outlined by Calverton: the party magazine *New Masses* devoted a particularly long article to “Calverton’s Marxism,” condemning him as a plagiarist and a “reactionary” whose theory had “fascist implications.” In a fashion reminiscent to the earlier attacks on the “exceptionalism” of the Lovestoneites, the authors criticized Calverton’s attempts to Americanize Marx:

¹⁹⁸ V. F. Calverton, “For a New America,” *The Modern Monthly* 7(1) (Feb. 1933), p. 4.

¹⁹⁹ V. F. Calverton, *For Revolution* (1932). Quoted in: Wilcox, V. F. Calverton, p. 158.

²⁰⁰ Lewis Corey, *The Crisis of the Middle Class* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1935), pp. 362, 65. See also: Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1973), pp. 91-94.

In his anxiety to be “American,” he completely dissociates himself from the international revolutionary movement of the world. His “revolution” is a verbal one, designed to attack the real revolutionary movement in America.²⁰¹

At the same time, especially since the Lovestone faction was expelled, the CPUSA needed support from intellectuals, while, in the wake of the Great Depression, a large number of writers and scholars themselves also felt the need to move closer to the party. Therefore, in this sense, the 1930s became America’s “red decade,” at least in its intellectual life – though it was an uneasy alliance where both sides distrusted the other. In 1932, a significant group of writers, literary critics and other intellectuals endorsed William Foster, the Communist candidate for president: the list, among many others, included Corey; the philosopher Sidney Hook; and the journalist Elliot Cohen who later founded the Jewish magazine *Commentary*. Cohen’s path to communism represented a larger trend among younger Jews facing exclusion because of rising anti-Semitism who “began to look to those communities that stressed universalism rather than ethnic particularism.”²⁰² Thus, the dominant particularism of the mainstream discourse alienated intellectuals in search of a universalist theory, which they found momentarily in communism.

Nevertheless, the uneasy alliance could not last long. The Communist Party remained too rigid for intellectuals, while party leaders were suspicious of ideas that diverged from the positions articulated in Moscow. When, in 1933, Hook published *Towards the Understanding of Marx*, a new interpretation of Marxist thought clearly affected by the philosophy of his mentor, John Dewey, Communists vehemently attacked him even though the book remained within a Leninist framework.²⁰³ As Hitler rose to power, the international situation dramatically

²⁰¹ David Ramsey and Alan Calmer, “The Marxism of V. F. Calverton,” *New Masses* 8(6), January 1933, pp. 9-27. Quotes are from pp. 23-24. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/new-masses/1933/v08n06-jan-1933-New-Masses.pdf>

²⁰² Christopher Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 69; Nathan Abrams, *Commentary Magazine 1945-59: ‘A Journal of Significant Thought and Opinion’* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2007), p. 22.

²⁰³ Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook*, p. 83. See also: John Patrick Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: Norton, 1992), pp. 158-164.

changed, and Calverton – with Hook’s support – warned that only a new, “Americanized” Communist party, rather than Roosevelt’s New Deal, could prevent the rise of fascism in America.²⁰⁴ He believed that the New Deal would soon lead to the disillusionment of the working class, which – without a serious left-wing alternative – would only strengthen the populism of Huey Long:

What we need is a new radical party, a new revolutionary party, a new Communist party which will orient itself to American conditions, speak the American language, and address itself to the American workers and farmers. Such a party should set out to do what the Socialist Party, because of its evolutionary, parliamentary emphasis and reactionary leadership, and the Communist Party, because of its Russian orientation and bureaucratic distortions, have failed to do. ... Whether [American workers] become the followers of the Huey Longs or of a new radical party depends upon whether there will be such a party to win their allegiance. To fail to create such a party means to prepare the way for the easy success of an American Mussolini or Hitler.²⁰⁵

The idea of a new party received support from other parts of the fragmented radical movement: Benjamin Gitlow, on his way out from the Lovestoneite movement, and Reinhold Niebuhr, a member of the Socialist Party at the time, had similar thoughts. Niebuhr recognized the weakness of his own party, and believed that building a new Farmer-Labor party “was the only progressive alternative to the haphazard reformism of the New Deal and the demagogic pseudo-radicalism of Huey Long and Father Coughlin.”²⁰⁶ Therefore, even though right-wing opponents derided the New Deal as a road to socialism, intellectuals on the left, among them even such opponents of communism such as Niebuhr, were critical of its incremental nature, and believed it an inadequate response to the crisis, which could, ultimately, contribute to the rise of fascism. In just a few years, their position would change: Niebuhr, for his part, though reluctantly, supported Roosevelt’s re-election in 1936.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ The “Rooseveltians” were the ones “who betray the democratic tradition,” whereas Marxists would truly preserve it, he argued in the month of FDR’s inauguration. “In Defense of the Democratic Tradition,” editorial, *Modern Monthly* 7(2) (March 1933), p. 70.

²⁰⁵ “The Pulse of Modernity,” editorial, *Modern Monthly* 7(9) (October 1933), p. 518.

²⁰⁶ Benjamin Gitlow, “A Labor Party for America,” *Modern Monthly* 7(8) (September 1933), pp. 491-501; Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 170. (Niebuhr even believed that FDR was a “cagey charlatan” – Fox, p. 176.)

²⁰⁷ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 177.

In the end, no new party could gain strength; the New Deal proved to be the “lesser evil” for more pragmatist leftists, while – somewhat unexpectedly – the Communist Party itself showed some willingness to open toward those advancing the Americanization of Marxism. A few years after Calverton proclaimed that “a united front against Fascism” was needed to “avoid the success of an American Hitler,” the CPUSA also became a chief proponent of the United Front.²⁰⁸ Of course, this development did not have much to do with their own re-interpretation of the American tradition, but rather followed a largely similar turn in Stalin’s behavior, beginning in 1934. That year, Stalin gave an interview to H. G. Wells in which he, while reiterating his revolutionary criticism of capitalism, spoke favorably about Roosevelt.²⁰⁹ Nevertheless, in the appreciation of the American tradition, Browder’s Communist Party went much further than the Lovestone group had ever gone – and for which Lovestone had been chastised as an “exceptionalist” by none other than Browder himself. Less than a decade after those vehement attacks and only a few years since labeling the New Deal as a “fore-runner of American fascism,” Browder now claimed that – even though Roosevelt’s program was definitely “not a socialist program” – it was “a thousand times better to have a liberal and progressive New Deal ... than to have a new Hoover.”²¹⁰ American history was re-interpreted, too: Jefferson was now presented as a forerunner of Marxism-Leninism, Lincoln as the “greatest figure” of the American tradition, while the party’s new slogan proclaimed that “Communism is the Americanism of the twentieth century.” In a 1936 pamphlet titled *Who Are the Americans?*, Browder reiterated his deep affection for the country and – while drawing direct parallels between the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Communist Manifesto* – he asserted that Communists were “the only ones who consciously continue [American] traditions

²⁰⁸ “For a United Front,” editorial, *Modern Monthly* 7(3) (April 1933), p. 134.

²⁰⁹ Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 93-94.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

and apply them to the problems of today.”²¹¹ This was not an entirely original argument: in fact, Browder’s proclamation sounded especially similar to the one outlined by Bertram Wolfe ten years earlier in *The Workers Monthly*.²¹² Then it was condemned as a primary example of “exceptionalism” – now it was the official party line. It is not surprising that members of the former Lovestone faction and intellectuals, previously derided for their exceptionalist views, remained suspicious of the Communist Party’s change in tone. Still, party organs were looking for ways to enlist intellectuals for their cause.

In the mid-1930s, Lewis Corey already made plans for multiple projects which would have highlighted the radical heritage in American traditions. Around 1935, he proposed a book titled “Rebel Americans” to present a “history of the making of American life through a study of the progressives and radicals: the decline of the middle class and the emergence of labor,” starting with the biographies of such historical figures as Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and getting to socialist leaders like Eugene Debs and Daniel De Leon by the end. This project did not materialize, nor did the one outlined in his application for the Guggenheim Scholarship which intended to explore the history of the American labor movement “in relation to the development and significance of American society,” and which was supposed to consider “many specific features and problems, some of them American peculiarities” including the effects of the frontier and the general influence of democracy – but these manuscripts also underline Corey’s changing interests toward the specific American context of radical politics.²¹³ In 1936, *New Masses* invited Corey to arrange a special issue on the topic of the American middle class: even though it was published in the party’s magazine, and despite

²¹¹ Earl Browder, *Who Are the Americans?* (New York: Workers’ Library Publishers, 1936), <https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt%3A31735066228234>, pp. 6; 11-12.

²¹² Wolfe, “Whose Revolution Is It?” (See chapter 1, fn. 137.)

²¹³ *Rebel Americans* and *Plan for Works*. Project outlines. Lewis Corey Papers, Box 15 (Correspondence 1935-1938). Rare Book and Manuscripts Library, Columbia University.

Corey's complaints later that "other editors distorted some of the articles," the selection still reflected his broadening interest.²¹⁴ Corey himself contributed with an article in which he reiterated his main theses from *The Crisis of the Middle Class*, while he also included an essay by non-Communist Herbert Agar who condemned "monopoly capitalism" and called on communists and social democrats to fight together for shared ideals against fascists.²¹⁵ Originally, Corey also planned to have an article specifically about the "American Dream": Louis Hacker was asked to write about its origins together with the role of the frontier, about its contemporary limitations, and how its "only possible fulfillment [was] under Socialism;" however, Hacker had to decline the offer because of other commitments.²¹⁶

In 1934, the Communist Party also launched *Partisan Review* (PR), a magazine focusing on literary and social criticism, which was created to strengthen Communist influence among intellectuals. In a way, PR's success exceeded all expectations, as it became one of the most important nodes of cultural activities for the coming decades; however, rather symbolically for American radicalism, it was less of an accomplishment for the CPUSA as the editors soon found their own voice independently from the party line, and, by the mid-1940s, the journal turned firmly anti-Communist. Even during its Communist period, it began looking beyond the official party positions, and in 1936, editors asked many of their authors to contribute to a debate on the connection between Americanism and Marxism. Responses varied: while some were thinking more instrumentally about enlisting the American tradition for the purpose of radicalism, others, like Matthew Josephson, suggested that Marxist imperatives have to be "adapt[ed] ... most thoroughly to our American environment, our physical and moral climate,

²¹⁴ Esther Corey, "Lewis Corey (Louis Fraina), 1892-1953: A Bibliography with Autobiographical Notes," *Labor History* 4(2) (Spring 1963), p. 116; *New Masses*, April 7, 1936.

²¹⁵ Lewis Corey, "The Minds of the Middle Class," *New Masses*, April 7, 1936, pp. 15-16; Herbert Agar, "The Ideal We Share," *New Masses*, April 7, 1936, p. 27.

²¹⁶ "Outline of Quarterly Issue of *New Masses*, April 7, on the Middle Class," early 1936; Lewis Corey to Louis Hacker, February 7, 1936; Louis Hacker to Lewis Corey, February 10, 1936. Lewis Corey Papers, Box 15 (Correspondence 1935-1938).

and our historical traditions.”²¹⁷ These debates provided a continuation of the “exceptionalist” discourse of American Communism a decade before, and pointed toward a more complex understanding of Americanism than the previous Leninist one. John Dos Passos, a prominent radical writer of the *Partisan Review* circle of the time, went beyond the usual Marxist framework in his *U.S.A.* trilogy, and in 1939, he welcomed in another PR symposium “the trend towards American self-consciousness in current writing.” His response reflected developments of the era in the U.S. as well as in Europe when he said:

I think there is enough real democracy in the very mixed American tradition to enable us, with courage and luck, to weather the social transformations that are now going on without losing all our liberties or the humane outlook that is the medium in which civilizations grow. The reaction to home-bred ways of thinking is a healthy defence against the total bankruptcy of Europe. As I have come to believe firmly that in politics the means tend to turn out to be more important than the ends, I think that the more our latent pragmatism and our cynicism in regard to ideas is stimulated the safer we will be.²¹⁸

By the time of this symposium, PR cut its connections to the Communist Party, and many radicals had become disillusioned with Communism precisely because – as for Dos Passos – democracy came to the center instead of the class struggle. Amid rising international dangers, the re-evaluation of Marxism went in parallel with the re-evaluation of American democracy to which we now turn.

The Democratic Exception: Disillusionment with Communism

Reinhold Niebuhr published *The Moral Man and Immoral Society* in 1932, which immediately stirred up the pacifist Protestant circles in which he had been previously involved. “Doctrine of Christ and Marx’s Linked,” *The New York Times* declared in a review, and many liberal

²¹⁷ “What is Americanism? A Symposium of Marxism and the American Tradition,” *Partisan Review* 3(3) (April 1936), p. 8.

²¹⁸ John Dos Passos in: “The Situation in American Writing: Seven Questions,” *Partisan Review* 6(4) (Summer 1939), p. 27. On Dos Passos and the American tradition, see also: John P. Diggins, *Up from Communism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 83-87.

Christians believed Niebuhr went too far: embracing the radical cause and claiming that violence could not be prevented under certain political circumstances was not acceptable from their ethical point. But Niebuhr's thesis – articulated in the very first sentence of his book – was exactly that the moral code of a society or a nation inevitably differs from that of an individual and “this distinction justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing.”²¹⁹ At this point, Niebuhr primarily understood this in the context of domestic politics. Soon, his peculiar Christian realism was extended to the international sphere as he began to advocate for a more interventionist foreign policy. Nevertheless, even with his limited endorsement of Marxism, Niebuhr derided Communism for its “religious absolutism” which lacked the transcendence of Christianity – though he believed it could still be useful because it “will furnish the criticism which will save parliamentary socialism from complete opportunism and futility.”²²⁰ In the following years, he would remain an active participant of the militant wing of the Socialist Party, but by the end of the decade he moved closer to the New Deal coalition. Certainly, Niebuhr was no exceptionalist himself: in one of the rare instances when he indeed used the term, he remarked that even a plausible argument for “American exceptionalism” could be questioned on the grounds whether “the democratic tradition has more power [in the United States] than in England.”²²¹ Still, he found something especially important in American democracy, and this was representative of a wider transformation of the radical left.

What explains this shift among a large number of radical intellectuals? Reasons are to be found both domestically and internationally, and, more importantly, in the interaction between these spheres. On the domestic front, the New Deal, eventually, proved to be a success – albeit a

²¹⁹ “Doctrine of Christ and Marx’s Linked,” *The New York Times*, December 10, 1932, p. 13; Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 136; Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932), p. xi.

²²⁰ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, pp. 222-223.

²²¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Jerome Frank’s Way Out,” *The Nation* 147, July 9, 1938, p. 45.

fragile and uneven one for a while: despite the achievements of FDR's first term, a new wave of recession hit the American economy in 1937-38, and full recovery did not happen until the war. Nevertheless, the more pessimistic predictions did not materialize, and – as the Union Party's poor showing in the 1936 presidential election showed – the threats to the future of American democracy seemed to ease even though they did not fade away entirely. In his 1937 congressional speech, Roosevelt could more convincingly declare that the New Deal had demonstrated "that democracies are best able to cope with the changing problems of modern civilization."²²² Moreover, according to many evaluations, a more radical phase of the New Deal began around 1935, which allowed leftists to identify themselves with the president's program.²²³ Internationally, first, Hitler's rise to power in Germany initiated a re-consideration of both American conditions and leftist tactics. Already in 1933, Calverton partly attributed the rise of true fascists to the Stalinist doctrine of stigmatizing social democrats as "social fascists;" for him, neglecting the middle class was a particularly serious mistake in America, "the most middle class country of the world."²²⁴ Not independently from the German developments, soon the re-evaluation of the Soviet Union and, consequently, of the Communist Party followed – at least, among certain intellectuals. The disillusionment did not happen at once: it was a cumulative process, and for different people, the Stalinist regime lost the benefit of the doubt at different times. For Benjamin Gitlow, it was a personal visit to Moscow which triggered the break: having seen conditions there, he could no longer condone Lovestone's support for Stalin's domestic politics in a time when "millions of Russians starved to death." He left the Lovestone group and soon completely broke with Communism – later he wrote that the Communist Party was nothing "but a propaganda agency of the Soviet Union;" whose

²²² Quoted in: Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, p. 251.

²²³ Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), p. 3. But see on the historiography of the "First" and "Second New Deals": Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, pp. 247-249. In Katznelson's view, "the division between the First and the Second New Deal signifies not a major break but a lesser inflection." (p. 248)

²²⁴ Quoted in: Wilcox, V. F. *Calverton*, p. 169.

“protestations of patriotism towards America are as insincere as those of the Nazi German-American Bund,” because “[b]oth fly the American flag, yet both owe their allegiance to a foreign power;” while both the Trotskyist and the Lovestoneite opposition failed because “[n]either group ha[d] anything to offer to the dispossessed of America.”²²⁵ News about Stalin’s purges – especially Bukharin’s trial that Bertram Wolfe called an “infamous and murderous farce” – shook others’ beliefs in the Soviet system: while some in the orbit of the Communist Party accepted official rationalizations, many more protested.²²⁶ But the final nail in the CPUSA’s coffin was the news of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact: as the party rhetoric immediately moved from “Popular Front” to the discussions of an “imperialist war” in which Communists were not taking sides, it became crystal clear that party policies were indeed decided in Moscow rather than being based on American conditions.²²⁷

The relative success of the New Deal compared to the rise of dictatorships in Europe made radicals re-evaluate democracy in the United States. The nature of the exception seemed to transform: the United States was no longer perceived to be behind Europe in the development of socialism, but – in some regards – was ahead by maintaining its democracy against the tide of dictatorial regimes. *Totalitarianism* as a new threat appeared in the vocabulary: from the point of view that gained ground on the anti-Stalinist left, Communism and Nazism could be equally dangerous, and liberal democracy needed to show strength.²²⁸ In 1937, Joseph Freeman responded to a Trotskyist critic with these words at a writers’ congress organized by the

²²⁵ Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess: The Truth about American Communism* (New York: Dutton & Co, 1940), pp. 486; 575, 572.

²²⁶ Bertram D. Wolfe, *Breaking with Communism: The Intellectual Odyssey of Bertram D. Wolfe*, ed. Robert Hessen (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), p. 13.

²²⁷ On the break between some intellectuals and the CPUSA in the 1939-41 period, see: Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, chapters 2-5; and William L. O’Neill, *A Better World: Stalinism and the American Intellectuals* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1990), pp. 13-42.

²²⁸ On the origins of “totalitarianism” as a word, see: Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and enlightenment: political knowledge after total war, totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), ch. 1.

CPUSA: “We are living in a period when our job is to preserve those conditions under which a congress such as this can be held at all. We could not hold a congress like ours in Germany or Italy. You who are so profoundly theoretical about the People’s Front could not even discuss the question in those countries. We would all be in concentration camps.”²²⁹ Then, Freeman still defended the Communist Party’s Popular Front line; however, two years later, when Stalin sided with Hitler, he left the party. The choice between a democratic regime and a communist one allied with fascism was not difficult.

In 1935, as was seen above, Corey could still justify a “wholly functional and temporary” communist dictatorship, which – in contrast with fascism which “urges dictatorship as an ideal and eternal,” – would merely be a “transitional measure.”²³⁰ Five years later, he could no longer accept such an anti-democratic position; on the contrary, communism and fascism were now both totalitarian ideologies, and Corey concluded that even Marxism needed a revision. Although, in a 1936 letter, he still believed that there was “nothing wrong with Marxist economics,” and its “application, amplification and verification” was necessary; by 1940, he changed his mind and in a three-part series titled *Marxism Reconsidered* published in *The Nation*, he recognized some fundamental flaws in Marxist theory.²³¹ Totalitarian dictatorship, he now argued, was to some extent inherent in the socialist path:

Actually, the situation is this: *the socialist system of collective ownership is compatible with totalitarianism*. It is, in fact, the basis of a new element of political centralization of all economic power. [...] While collective ownership *may* result in socialism, the evidence now is overwhelming that it may also result in totalitarianism. [...] The situation becomes still more disturbing if we draw, as I now think we must, another conclusion: *there is a totalitarian potential in the socialist economic system*. Russian communism exploits the potential but did not create it.²³²

²²⁹ Quoted in: Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, p. 12.

²³⁰ Corey, *The Crisis of the Middle Class*, p. 362.

²³¹ Lewis Corey to Herman Schendel, January 25, 1936. Lewis Corey papers, Box 15 (Correspondence 1935-38); Lewis Corey, “Marxism Reconsidered – I,” *The Nation*, February 17, 1940, pp. 245-248; “Marxism Reconsidered – II,” *The Nation*, February 24, 1940, pp. 272-275; “Marxism Reconsidered – III,” *The Nation*, March 2, 1940, pp. 305-307.

²³² Corey, “Marxism Reconsidered – I,” pp. 246-247. (Emphases in original.)

While his turnabout did not mean that he also discarded previous criticism of capitalism, he became aware of the dangers of modern bureaucracy and statism exacerbated by a one-party system. Therefore, Corey argued that the emphasis should be on democracy; socialism had to be re-created on a democratic basis as he aimed for a “system of pluralism in government and industry which permits the largest measure of self-government and freedom of expression and action to the community’s economic and cultural interests.”²³³

Corey was not alone: by the late 1930s, ex-Communists became the most outspoken about the dangers of the party that was under Moscow’s complete control. As R. G. Powers writes, “[e]ach successive stage in the process of Stalinizing the party would provide a new crop of ex-Communists – expellees, defectors, and other casualties – and out of them would emerge a new contingent of anticommunists who would play an influential role in the history of American anticommunism.”²³⁴ As the news about Stalin’s purges reached the U.S., Sidney Hook arrived at the conclusion that communism was “a danger *to* America, rather than *in* America;” thus, together with other prominent figures of the “anti-totalitarian left” like Dewey, Eastman, Calverton, or Sinclair Lewis, he created the *Committee for Cultural Freedom* (CCF) to counter communist front organizations.²³⁵ Their group of intellectuals could find their new voice in a re-invented *Partisan Review*: after a brief suspension of publication, PR returned in 1937 with an editorial statement promising that it “will not be dislodged from its independent position by any political campaign against it” and “the pages will be open to any tendency which is relevant to literature in our time.”²³⁶ Soon, they published André Gide’s *Second Thoughts on the USSR* which detailed the fallacies of the show trials in Moscow; as well as Trotsky’s responses to the charges against him. Among others, Hook, Dos Passos, and later

²³³ Corey, “Marxism Reconsidered – III,” p. 307.

²³⁴ Powers, *Not Without Honor*, p. 105.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 140; O’Neill, *A Better World*, p. 14; Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook*, pp. 202-210.

²³⁶ “Editorial statement,” *Partisan Review* 4/1 (December 1937), p. 4.

George Orwell, Arthur Koestler and Hannah Arendt became regular contributors, strengthening a firmly anti-totalitarian tone.²³⁷

In the anti-totalitarian discourse, the language of “democracy” replaced socialism as a universalist aim, which paved the way for a reorientation of foreign policy objectives though the move toward activism went much slower. In the “Popular Front” era of 1937-39, the Communist Party favored a more interventionist course, while non-Communists such as the socialist leader Norman Thomas promoted pacifism through the organization of the *Keep America Out of the War Congress*. As the war broke out and Communist organs defended the Soviet-Nazi pact, roles partly turned: now it was the CPUSA that rejected participation in the “imperialist” war, whereas more and more intellectuals on the anti-Stalinist left agreed with Roosevelt’s efforts to do away with neutrality laws, and favored some form of support for the allies: Niebuhr and Corey, as we will see in the next chapter, were leading proponents of an interventionist foreign policy through the newly-created *Union for Democratic Action*.²³⁸ The debate over intervention also finally led to the dissolution of the Lovestone faction. By the end of the 1930s, members of the former Opposition, having distanced themselves from communism, were discussing whether the United States had to increase defense spending in anticipation of an entry to the war: while Wolfe insisted on neutralism, Lovestone and Will Herberg moved closer to a pro-interventionist stance.²³⁹ By this time, Lovestone was also working as a foreign-policy advisor to the *American Federation of Labor* (AFL); in this position, his task was to mobilize support among “the British and European workers in their fight against dictators,” and he also served as an executive secretary for an organization called

²³⁷ André Gide, “Second Thoughts on the USSR,” *Partisan Review*, 4(2) (Jan. 1938), pp. 21-28.

²³⁸ Nonetheless, Thomas maintained his position of neutrality; together with Wolfe, he was still working on a program titled “Keep America Out of the War” as Hitler and Stalin moved against Poland. Doenecke, “Non-Interventionist of the Left;” Wolfe, *Breaking with Communism*, p. 47.

²³⁹ Bertram Wolfe, “About ‘Adequate Defence,’” *Workers Age* 9(39) (November 23, 1940), p. 3; Will Herberg, “An Analysis That Misses...,” *Workers Age* 9(40) (December 7, 1940), p. 4; Will Herberg, “Confusion Without End,” *Workers Age* 9(41) (December 21, 1940), p. 4.

The League for Human Rights, Freedom, and Democracy.²⁴⁰ A decade earlier Lovestone, despite being a devout Leninist, had been expelled for the “heresy” of “American exceptionalism,” now he indeed advocated for defending the “American way of life” abroad.

Nevertheless, “exceptionalism” could still carry negative connotations in the late 1930s, even if mentioned in support of the regeneration of democracy. Max Lerner, a prominent leftist journalist who – even though not being a member of the party – did not entirely abandon his Communist sympathies, argued for a “militant democracy” in his 1939 book *It Is Later Than You Think*. For him, this meant that while “democracy in America has become an ardently wooed maiden, beleaguered by suitors,” they “ought to be a bit wary about this sudden and excessive love,” as even fascists and communists paid lip-service to democratic ideals, without being sincere about them. Democracy should not be taken for granted, Lerner warned his contemporaries; thus, a “militant democracy” “must learn to recognize and know its enemies, understand their tactics, be willing to uncover those tactics and confront them.”²⁴¹ While “progressives in America [were] talking more than ever in terms of American exceptionalism,” he – in a reference to the title of Lewis’s book – believed that there was no reason to think that a fascist dictatorship “really can’t happen here” because of some supposedly unique American conditions. Lerner claimed that he was not arguing against the theory of exceptionalism, he was just pointing out that

a proper respect for our unique national traits does not require us to become secessionists from world history. There is an important difference between exceptionalism on the one hand, and a recognition that whatever happens to America (or China or Italy or Turkey or Spain) will represent a coloring of world trends by unique traits and traditions.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Geert van Goethem, “From Dollars to Deeds: Exploring the Sources of Active Interventionism, 1934-1945,” in: *American Labor’s Global Ambassadors: The International History of the AFL-CIO during the Cold War*, eds. Robert Anthony Waters, Jr. and Geert van Goethem (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 14. For the rest of his life, with active OSS/CIA connections, Lovestone worked for an interventionist/anti-communist foreign policy. Morgan, *A covert life*; Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 52-54.

²⁴¹ Max Lerner, *It Is Later Than You Think: The Need for a Militant Democracy* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939), pp. 87, 103.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

Was there any reason to believe that the United States was a democratic exception after all? Strictly speaking, it was definitely no exception, as Lerner or Niebuhr correctly saw: the dangers that existed elsewhere were present in America, too; and – considering the racial policies of the South, or the Japanese internment camps after the American entry to the war – the U.S. could not boast an entirely clean record. It is true that liberal democracy was retained, but so was it in Canada, Britain, and in many (mostly Western and Northern) European countries before being overrun by Nazi troops. However, on a larger scale, Roosevelt’s results were still remarkable: with a country of the size and influence of the United States, it was to some extent uniquely positioned to address the crisis and reinvigorate the political system largely within the scope of its constitutional framework. Even with the price paid for FDR’s many compromises, the New Deal was a victory for democracy – which was increasingly clear for intellectuals on the left: in the end, this also led Lerner to reconsider exceptionalism in his classic *America as a Civilization*, which, alongside other works, will be highlighted in Chapter 3.

Conclusion

While the term “exceptionalism” itself was not used very often in the 1930s, the discussions among radicals about the unique American path continued. The chapter, thus, traced the transformation of the leftist discourse as was observable in these contestations: by the end of the decade, the “Americanization of Marxism” was increasingly about America while less and less about Marx. Nevertheless, often the use of Marxist logic or language was extended to the newer objects of analysis, which explains how certain ideas and concepts, including exceptionalism, traveled from one context to another. The debates gradually advanced a shift of understanding of the United States as a “democratic exception” in the age of totalitarian dictatorships instead of being just another imperialist power. This was, of course, contested:

even in 1941, as America was about to enter the war, many leftists believed that they should not choose sides in the conflict; and even amid calls for a common anti-totalitarian policy, Communists and sympathizers believed that the crimes of the Soviet Union were much exaggerated by anti-Communist propaganda. Still, a redefined position of universalism and activism gradually emerged as a common ground with the Roosevelt administration.

The rareness of direct references to exceptionalism would imply that the period between 1929 and 1941 was a transitional stage in terms of the development of exceptionalist discourse. However, the findings of this chapter support a stronger claim: the reinterpretation of America from a radical leftist point of view amid the effects of a prolonged crisis, together with a new emphasis on democracy instead of class struggle, made it possible for exceptionalism to re-emerge in a new context after the war. By then, America's role within the international environment was also fundamentally altered, which extended the relevance of the context to a foreign policy dimension; this was certainly not new for those (former) radicals who had long been advocating the interrelation between domestic and foreign, and between political and economic issues – the further development of these ideas will be explored in Chapter 3. Here, we need to identify how exceptionalism *worked* in America's "red decade." Initially, the invocation of the term continued to reinforce the same delineations between "true communists" and "heretics" just like earlier; "true communists" could even feel some sense of justification with the Great Depression as – they could now argue – America was truly not above the laws of capitalist growth and crisis. Still, as the 1930s advanced, a strange phenomenon happened: even those who had previously condemned theories of exceptionalism saw it necessary to emphasize America's unique conditions. On the one hand, this was done just to follow directives coming from Moscow: the shifts of the Communist Party, as was seen already in the previous chapter, had less to do with convincing theoretic arguments or changes in perceptions of American conditions than with tactical turns in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, it was

also a reflection on the previous failures of American radical leftism; the Depression gave various groups an opportunity to say something relevant about the United States, but, for this, they really had to speak in American terms.

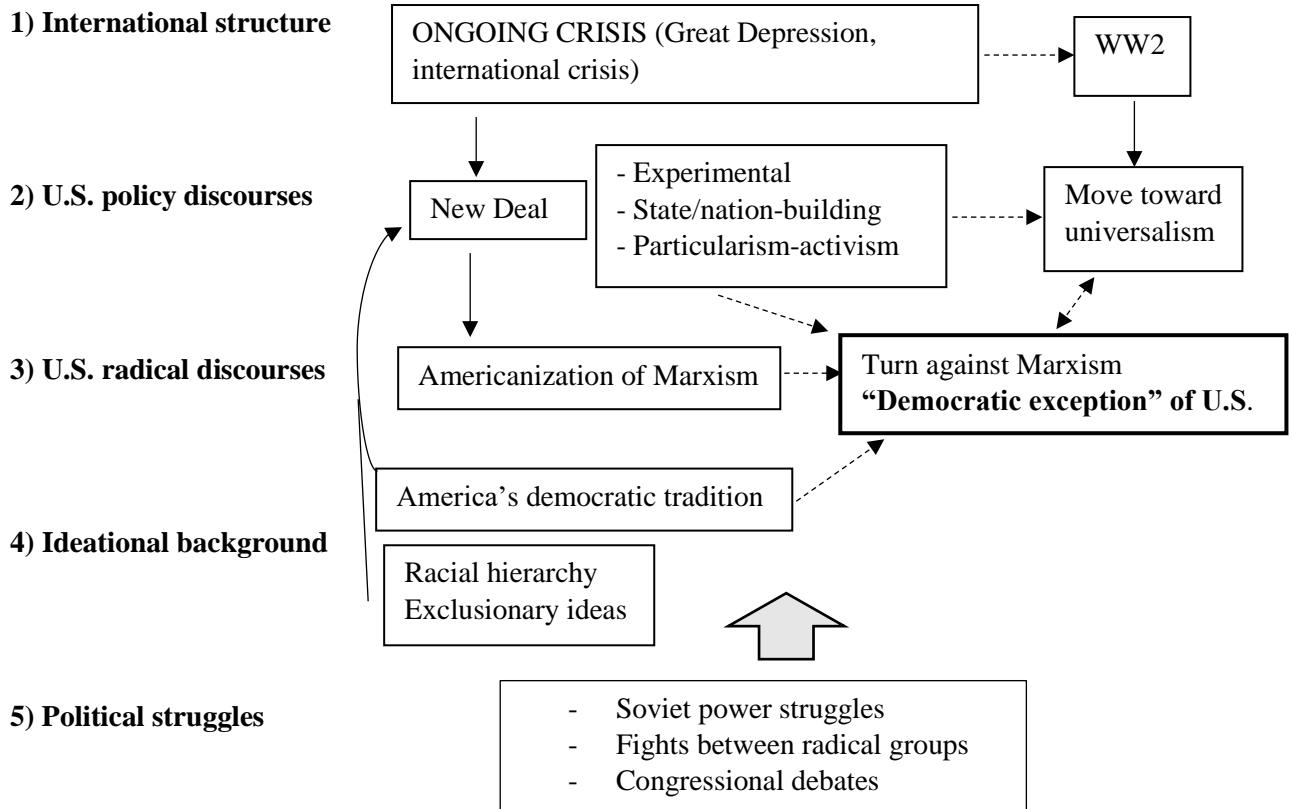


Figure 2. The discourse-tracing of American exceptionalism (1929-41).

Therefore, the discourse-tracing process identified in Figure 1 of the previous chapter could be extended in the following way (see Figure 2). On top, there was the dimension of *international structure* and world history. The period between 1929 and 1941 can be regarded as an ongoing crisis, beginning with the collapse of financial markets, continuing in the Great Depression and triggering an international cataclysm with the rise of fascism which finally led to World War II. Different aspects of this ongoing crisis were interpreted continuously in both the policy and the leftist discourse. On the level of *U.S. policies*, the New Deal dominated: the chapter has highlighted its experimental nature, its relevance in the building of the American state and for

national consciousness, and its continuation of a particularist-activist path in foreign policy. The layer of the *radical discourse* was partly a reflection on the crisis and partly on the policies: even though the earlier Communist debate on exceptionalism evaporated, the left responded with the “Americanization of Marx” to their sudden rise in relevance, though, by the end of the era, partly as an acknowledgement of the successes of Roosevelt’s incrementalistic approach, and partly in response to international developments including the Stalinist purges, an embrace of a discourse centered on democracy paralleled the disillusionment with Marxism. For this, the left mobilized an earlier “American democratic tradition” (*ideational background*), contrasting its content with ideas of racism and exclusion which characterized the discourse of certain far-right groups. Finally, *political contestation* was important both at the level of congressional politics (one can think of FDR’s compromises in order to secure a majority for New Deal programs here) and among radicals, where various leftist factions and groups competed with each other while discussing the same issues and mostly using the same language.

As the United States moved closer to entering the war, earlier assumptions on universalism and particularism, intervention and withdrawal had to be reconsidered. In her analysis of how a “new American multilateralism” was forged, Borgwardt notes that while World War II was indeed a turning point, “all of the fundamental ideas about multilateralism and human rights that are attributed to this historical moment had been fully articulated decades earlier.” She highlights three approaches, a “legalistic” one originated in late 19th-century thinking, a Wilsonian/progressive “moralistic” and a truly Rooseveltian “New Deal idiom” (“synthetic, institution-based, problem-solving approach”) which together made FDR’s vision of the Atlantic Charter a “New Deal for the world.”²⁴³ To this, we can add a distinctive path of radical thinking which, through a peculiar route, also arrived at similar conclusions. Chapter 3 will

²⁴³ Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, p. 61.

discuss how these ideas were manifested in an emerging post-war political and economic order, and how this elicited a reconsideration of not just America's global role, but also of how the notion of exception should be perceived in this order. Chapter 4, then, moves to the crisis of the order, when America's exceptional qualities were seemingly questioned, but ultimately, got reaffirmed.

Chapter 3 –

Exception and Order: The Construction of America's Global Role (1941-60)

In her discussion of American exceptionalism, Hilde Restad proposes a rethinking of the “turn-around” theory concerning a substantial shift in U.S. foreign policy around 1941. Instead, she emphasizes continuities, and suggests a framework in which a constant belief in exceptionalism oriented American decision-making. Thus, according to her, the shift from isolationism to internationalism did not happen because the United States had not been isolationist in the first place, but even a transformation from unilateralism to multilateralism is questionable; “the turn-around thesis should be treated as a more limited argument of U.S. commitment to a specific international order *over which it exerted considerable control*, rather than positing a fundamental change in the American outlook on how to engage with the world.”²⁴⁴ Then, instead of reflecting the characteristics of American democracy as many scholars argue, the post-war order “was the internationalization of American exceptionalism,” which, accordingly, pre-existed as an idea before the construction of America's new global role.²⁴⁵ On the other hand, David Hughes believes that her argument reads exceptionalism backwards; he claims instead that American exceptionalism “is a discourse *produced* by the ‘impressive increase’ in US power” as “it has selectively drawn on different aspects of US history and blended them with fiction in order to produce a variety of myths all testifying to the ‘exceptional’ status of

²⁴⁴ Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 100. (Emphasis in original.)

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 179. For works that presuppose a connection between the domestic U.S. set-up and the post-war order, see: Ruggie, “The Past As Prologue;” John Gerard Ruggie, *Winning the Peace: America and World Order in the New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*; Anne-Marie Burley, “Regulating the World: Multilateralism, International Law, and the Projection of the New Deal Regulatory State,” in: *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form*, ed. John G. Ruggie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 125-156; G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

the United States” after the Second World War.²⁴⁶ Therefore, for him, exceptionalism is a concept born in the post-war world, its primary source is American power, while its function is to justify “exceptions” from international law.

This chapter presents a reading of the exceptionalist discourse within this crucial period that supplements both accounts. On the one hand, compared to Restad’s argument, I highlight significant shifts in the articulations of exceptionalism which partly stem from parallel shifts in American foreign policy – a move from particularism toward a more universalist position, and toward a commitment to a certain form of international order which was unprecedented in U.S. history. On the other hand, while power is indeed important in these turns, it does not completely explain the move within the discourse; after all, the United States already became a leading power in the aftermath of the First World War without assuming similar responsibilities justified under the same terms. Furthermore, the preceding chapters have shown an already existing exceptionalist discourse in the radical left; certainly, it had a different meaning, but it slowly began to transform as radicals reappraised the American tradition and moved toward appreciating American democracy as a potential reason to see the United States as exceptional. This is the discourse which was evoked in a new context, centered around new conceptions on global order and responsibility. Therefore, this chapter understands the exceptionalist discourse in this timeframe as *an intellectual construct with Marxist roots, outlined primarily by (former) leftist intellectuals in order to resolve the possible tension between their universalist aims and the particularistic characteristics of a new American-led order built on American responsibility.*

To unpack this proposition, the following notions need further elaboration: the precise nature of the intellectual construct and the role of its Marxist roots; the tension between universalism

²⁴⁶ Hughes, “Unmaking an exception,” p. 534. (Emphasis in original.)

and particularism in this period; and the characteristics of the order as it appeared in the discourse of said intellectuals. The argument will be outlined in four steps. First, I show that – in the terms of the two-dimensional framework introduced previously – there *was* a shift in American foreign policy, a transformation toward universalist-activism in the order envisioned by Roosevelt and then Truman. Certainly, particularistic elements were retained: originally, in the peculiar form of the United Nations system which gave “exceptional” roles and prerogatives to the victorious powers; then, in the emerging Cold War confrontation, which, though defined in universalistic terms, practically constrained the universal applicability of the American model, while further reinforcing America’s unique position as the “leader of the free world.” Second, intellectuals *did* play a role in the construction, justification, and legitimation of this order. Moreover, those who (had) belonged to the anti-totalitarian left were in a peculiar position given their earlier association with Communism. In a short case study within this chapter, I examine the discourse connected to the organization *Union for Democratic Action (UDA)*, which was later renamed to *Americans for Democratic Action (ADA)*: this group encompassed left-wing intellectuals, labor leaders and in a later phase, even prominent politicians of the Democratic Party, representing a wider coalition of actors who united theory and action, and mobilized themselves in a two-front struggle for liberal principles both at home and abroad. Third, the discourse of this group is embedded in a wider intellectual context in which former radicals embraced democratic values and openly advocated for anti-communism – even in a time when many liberals still sympathized with the Soviet Union following the war. In journals such as *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*, America’s unique conditions and the values of American *civilization* were discussed, while also justifying an active international posture and a firmly anti-Soviet foreign policy. Fourth, this was the context in which authors like Niebuhr, Corey, Lerner or Louis Hartz described America’s role in the world order, from which a peculiar understanding of exceptionalism arose. Not all of them argued for

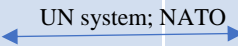
exceptionalism *per se*, but the common elements of their language provided the groundwork for the reinterpretation of the idea. This understanding of exception can only be comprehended in terms of the interrelation between exception and order; in important ways, exception became a defining characteristic of this new American-led order, which even suggests that, in this case, exception was evoked to *prove* the rule. Thus, the conclusion highlights how, in line with Hedley Bull's terminology about different institutions of international society, universalist and particularist elements were combined in an uneasy balance; this tension also helped to acknowledge the constraints and limits of America's international role, which gave – at this stage – a peculiar *realist* element to exceptionalist arguments.

The Universalism-Particularism Dilemma and the Post-War Order(s)

The first point of this chapter is that the post-war order, which was, to a large extent, the result of American planning and bore the imprints of the Roosevelt and Truman administrations' outlook on a desired international structure, can be conceived as a peculiar combination of universalist and particularist principles. In this sense, this was a major shift from the interwar period: as was shown in the previous chapters, Wilsonian universalism was soon overturned by the particularistic worldview of the subsequent Republican administrations, which was even maintained in the first years of FDR's presidency, though, by 1941, there was an ongoing transformation toward more universalist ideas. In that year, Roosevelt proclaimed in his annual congressional message that the "four freedoms" should be secured "everywhere in the world," while, later in the year, he, together with Winston Churchill, declared the common goals for a

post-war world in the Atlantic Charter – and all of this happened before Pearl Harbor.²⁴⁷ Later, as the United States entered the war, universalist proclamations grew rapidly and post-war planning intensified; the victorious coalition soon transformed into the all-encompassing organization of the United Nations which was grounded on universally valid principles. Nevertheless, the UN order could not play its proper function as it soon became clear that the emerging international system would be bipolar; therefore, the self-proclaimed “leader of the free world” could only propagate its values in one half of the world even if the rhetoric of lofty declarations like the Truman doctrine maintained their universalist tone. Consequently, what is often referred as “post-war order” in fact can imply two different post-war orders: the original United Nations system, and the one that materialized under the conditions of bipolarity. The argument here is that both were built on universalist ideas, but both also had to reflect particularist realities – partly because of the structural constraints in the international system, and partly because of the contestation of ideas which did not subside completely even at the height of the dominance of universalism and activism (see Table 6).

Table 6. Positions on America’s foreign-policy role (1941-50s).

	Universalism	Particularism
Activism	Atlantic Charter, Truman Doctrine	Kennan’s containment, realism
		
Withdrawal	1948 Henry Wallace campaign; anti-Cold War progressives	America First Committee; postwar Republican “nationalists” (Taft)

²⁴⁷ Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Four Freedoms Speech*, Jan. 6, 1941, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Four_Freedoms_speech; *The Atlantic Charter*, August 14, 1941, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/atlantic.asp>

According to Restad, the “second postwar order was a reaffirmation of *Lodgian* internationalism, *not* a belated turn-around to Wilsonianism.”²⁴⁸ She justifies it by pointing out that the UN system, contrary to the League of Nations, was planned by Americans in order to serve American interests; taking into account exactly those U.S. preferences for exceptions and exemptions which were embodied in Lodge’s reservations against the Versailles Treaty. Thus, the United States remained outside the League of Nations because it did not contain the same guarantees for American sovereignty that were, inherently, part of the new American-led project. This point is valid insofar as we consider some of the institutional features of the new order; Restad convincingly shows that certain elements of the new set-up such as the optional jurisdiction of the new International Court of Justice, the right of withdrawal, or the absence of something similar to the League’s controversial Article 10 on obligations related to collective security were explicitly included to accommodate previous American reservations, and thereby alleviate congressional concerns.²⁴⁹ However, presenting the new order as *Lodgian* downplays some of those features that markedly differed from the particularism envisioned by Lodge and practiced by the Republican administrations of the interwar era. In what forms was this universalism manifested?

First, in the previous chapters we have identified trade and immigration as important policy areas where the particularistic approach of Republicans was observable; thus, it can be asked how the post-World War II order differed in these aspects. The record is somewhat mixed, though a clear move toward universalism is recognizable. With regard to trade, FDR – following the advice of Secretary of State Cordell Hull – had been advocating for greater opening since the mid-1930s; open trade eventually became an important cornerstone in the

²⁴⁸ Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 161. (Emphasis in original.)

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-172.

planning of new arrangements, appearing already in the principles of the Atlantic Charter.²⁵⁰ Even though, ultimately, the U.S. Senate (alongside the British Parliament) rejected the charter of the International Trade Organization (ITO), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) still resulted in an expansion of global trade.²⁵¹ On immigration, the picture is even more complicated: immigration restrictions that had closed down the “main gate” to America remained in effect, but “the foreign policy establishment secured the opening of a side entrance” which allowed the acceptance of an increased number of people.²⁵² The exposure of the crimes of Nazism discredited the ethnic and racial elements of immigration policy; the “national origins” discourse receded and anti-Semitism also subsided. The particularistic conception of the American citizenship, its ethnicized and racialized undertones softened – though a full rejection of these ideas did not happen until the civil rights movement enforced it two decades after the end of the war. Moreover, with the rise of the Cold War, anti-communism brought back a new iteration of the “Red Scare”: McCarthyism reanimated exclusionary practices against those deemed to be “subversive,” which was, of course, in open contradiction with universal values.

Second, the interwar belief that the United States could *insulate* itself from developments of the world was forcefully refuted by the war experience, which justified a universalistic turn in *economic* matters. Anne-Marie Slaughter and Elizabeth Borgwardt skillfully present how American ideas about the New Deal regulatory state were transplanted into a “global New Deal.”²⁵³ Furthermore, the Atlantic Charter already introduced two important new elements stemming from the American experience, which differed from earlier aims of U.S. foreign

²⁵⁰ Americans argued against the British preferential system in war-time negotiations. At one point, Keynes “referred to the American obsession with free trade as the ‘lunatic proposals of Mr. Hull.’” Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, p. 103. See also pp. 23-26; 253-254.

²⁵¹ In the Senate, “conservative economist nationalists” such as Robert Taft argued against the ITO. Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 175.

²⁵² Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, p. 294.

²⁵³ Burley, “Regulating the World;” Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, esp. chapters 3-4.

policy: the *individual* was defined as possessing fundamental rights, which *rights* were also extended to the *economic* sphere.²⁵⁴ In Bretton Woods, American negotiators believed that the “two interlocking goals – global economic stability and local individual security – were a logical extension of the New Deal truism that stabilization of capitalism begins at home.”²⁵⁵ This projection of internal solutions to the outside world was indeed a significant change from Lodgian particularism. To be sure, the original idea of a “global New Deal” soon got diluted – not only because of the Senate rejection of the ITO, but also as the U.S. internally began to move away from the more radical solutions of the New Deal era with the rise of Cold War liberalism.²⁵⁶ Still, the original planning for the order based on the UN and its auxiliary institutions made a greater emphasis than ever on economic solutions with universalistic ambitions.

Third, this vision was also extended to the *political* sphere. Restad claims that the argument outlined by Slaughter and Borgwardt does not “explain why a ‘New Deal for the world’ would mean anything more than *economic* multilateralism;” thus, the U.S. could have engaged in closer economic cooperation without a similar commitment to “‘deep multilateralism’ in the *security* and *political* issue areas.”²⁵⁷ But the main new presupposition was precisely the idea that the *economic* wellbeing of individuals and nations was deeply connected to issues of *security*, and, in both areas, domestic and international problems are also interwoven.²⁵⁸ Thus, the universalist agenda appeared at the political level as well, ultimately paving the way for the emergence of a global human rights regime which was a substantial development even if we

²⁵⁴ Patel, *The New Deal*, pp. 273-274.

²⁵⁵ Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, p. 93.

²⁵⁶ Patel, *The New Deal*, p. 289. See also on the emergence of a domestic “procedural state”: Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, pp. 398-402; 478-479.

²⁵⁷ Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 110.

²⁵⁸ Patel, *The New Deal*, p. 282. Patel also cites that in a 1944 *The Nation* article, Freda Kirchway argued that “only a New Deal for the world ... can prevent the coming of World War III.” (p. 274.) See also: Ruggie, *Winning the Peace*.

take into account the American efforts to exempt themselves from its jurisdiction.²⁵⁹ Furthermore, while certainly it was an American-led order which reflected U.S. interests and even pressures in some cases, it was still not entirely an imposed order: as Patel points out, the institutional style of the UN was in fact the “result of long debates and involved a much wider set of actors,” thus did not exclusively bear American imprint.²⁶⁰

Nevertheless, the UN system, of course, also included important particularistic elements. The Preamble’s soaring language on individual rights was balanced with the more down-to-earth reaffirmation of the primacy of state sovereignty and domestic non-involvement,²⁶¹ while the institution of the Security Council, and especially the veto rights provided for its permanent members separated great powers from the rest of the nations. Still, a re-institution of a peculiar form of a great power concert was not a novelty; in fact, sovereign *inequality* had been a durable organizing principle of international order and hierarchical relations do not preclude the adoption of common universal values.²⁶² In Hedley Bull’s terms, *great power management* also embodies one of the primary institutions of international society together with such tools as diplomacy and international law; the tension between equal and unequal, or universalistic and particularistic elements, therefore, is largely unavoidable.²⁶³ Thus, even if American hegemony was a defining characteristic of the new order, this does not mean that the elevation of universal values or the tools of multilateralism were necessarily absent since multilateralism

²⁵⁹ Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, ch. 8; on U.S. exemptions, see: Ignatieff, ed., *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*.

²⁶⁰ Patel, *The New Deal*, p. 293. See also: Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), pp. 191-213; and his *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009)

²⁶¹ See Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 168 on the compromise that allowed the Preamble to begin with the words “We, the *peoples* of the United Nations” but ended with reference to representatives of governments.

²⁶² For sovereign inequalities, see: Jack Donnelly, “Sovereign Inequalities and Hierarchy in Anarchy: American Power and International Society,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12(2) (Jun. 2006), pp. 139-170; Gerry Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). On international hierarchies, the fundamental work is David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

²⁶³ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, ch. 9.

does not presuppose that states participate in institutions on equal footing.²⁶⁴ Moreover, even if one takes into account the re-articulation of Lodgian reservations, it is still remarkable how the United States *did* constrain itself within the new UN system: after all, under the conditions of nuclear monopoly it was still committed to a structure based on equality with other “great powers” with significantly weaker capabilities. The discourse of the American-led order, as we see in more detail below, was based on an understanding of *responsibility* which already appeared in Henry Luce’s famous 1941 editorial to *Life* in which the publisher proclaimed a new “American Century.”²⁶⁵ Luce’s publications, including *Time* and *Fortune*, were all mobilized for the interventionist cause: a *Fortune* editorial published a few months after “The American Century” explicitly called for a recognition that “certain principles must be accepted as transcending nationality.”²⁶⁶ Thus, an American-led world was perceived as possibly compatible with universalist goals, and these principles were put in practice during the Dumbarton Oaks and San Francisco negotiations. Even within the universalism of the new world institution, America could maintain the principle of regionalism, added originally because of its peculiar hemispheric relations, but soon paving the way for the construction of a North Atlantic regional order.

Thus, the bipolar order emerging with the new Cold War institutions such as NATO also reflected a combination of universalism and particularism. Yet that was not the primary intention of George Kennan, who, in his “X article,” argued for a “long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies,” though who would mainly envision

²⁶⁴ Restad claims that “[t]he issue of U.S. hegemony fundamentally questions the link that liberal and constructivist theories have made between an American civic nationalism and a commitment to multilateralism.” (Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 117; see also pp. 179-181.) Here I argue that hegemony and multilateralism can co-exist, thus the theories outlined by Ruggie and Ikenberry could remain valid in some form even with a greater emphasis on hegemony.

²⁶⁵ Henry Luce, “The American Century,” *Life*, February 17, 1941.

²⁶⁶ “The Future of U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Fortune*, May 1941. See also: Alan Brinkley, *The Publisher: Henry Luce and his American Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), p. 247.

it as a form of political pressure and not as “superfluous gestures of outward ‘toughness.’”²⁶⁷ While he also found it necessary to apply “counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points,” this realist and particularist approach was in sharp contrast with the universalistic language of the Truman Doctrine, calling for the defense of a “way of life” which is “distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression.”²⁶⁸ In the end, for Kennan, containment was primarily a “test of national quality,” while, for Truman, it was also the projection of American values to the international arena, at least to the “free half” of the world. Moreover, as Geir Lundestad famously showed, to a great extent, Europeans *asked* for American leadership, hence he introduced the concept of “empire by invitation” which also underlies the consensual nature of this hegemony.²⁶⁹ This, of course, does not contradict the fact that the U.S. was indeed a hegemon within its sphere, and – as Restad points out – “the European ‘invitations’ did not force the Americans to do anything they did not really want to do.”²⁷⁰ Nevertheless, NATO gave an institutional form for America’s involvement in Europe, and the Article 5 guarantee – even if it was not automatic – locked the United States into the European security system.²⁷¹

Even as a universalist-activist position was getting crystallized, there was also contestation in the early Cold War period: while the classical realism of Kennan or Hans Morgenthau

²⁶⁷ X [George Kennan], “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* (July 1947), p. 575.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 576; Harry S. Truman, *Address before a Joint Session of Congress* [Truman Doctrine], March 12, 1947. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp. Kennan, for his part, objected to the use of this abstract and universalist language. See: Lynn Boyd Hinds and Theodore Windt, *The Cold War as Rhetoric: The Beginnings, 1945-1990* (New York: Praeger, 1991), p. 143; John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), p. 256.

²⁶⁹ Geir Lundestad, *The American “Empire” and Other Studies of US Foreign Policy in a Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)

²⁷⁰ Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 178.

²⁷¹ Restad claims that originally the North Atlantic Treaty was not perceived as containing automatic or permanent security guarantees, which reinforces her argument that the post-war American order was essentially unilateralist, not multilateralist (Ibid., p. 177). Still, given the large disparities in power, NATO gave a relatively multilateralist setting for American hegemony, while the strength of Article 5 is highlighted by the fact that even questioning its automatic nature – as Donald Trump did multiple times – is seen as a disavowal of seven decades of traditions in American foreign policy.

emphasized particularism and involvement, less activist views were also present. In the 1948 presidential campaign, former Vice President Henry Wallace outlined a progressive program with a conciliatory approach to Stalin. However, in the wake of the coup in Czechoslovakia and the Berlin blockade, his support dissipated even among liberals. On the particularist side, Republican nationalists like Robert Taft favored a less interventionist approach; though Taft fell short of securing the 1952 nomination, which instead went to Dwight D. Eisenhower, a representative of the Cold War consensus. Both external rhetoric and internal discourse of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations underscore the universalist-activist characteristic of this new consensus (one can think of the crucial document NSC-68 here or the statements by John Foster Dulles), and even though Dulles and Eisenhower came to office with a new “liberation” agenda, in practice, their conduct was a continuation of the containment policies initiated under Truman. It is more difficult to locate McCarthyism here: Joe McCarthy was, of course, an enemy of Soviet expansion, though his nativism was much closer to the more isolationist tendencies of the interwar period; in important ways, he countered the internationalism of the era. But McCarthy was widely condemned, especially among intellectuals, which leads to the question how intellectuals participated from the early 1940s in the construction and legitimation of the new order.

Mobilizing for Activism: The Union for Democratic Action (UDA)

In his classic account of the birth of the post-war order, Robert Divine emphasizes the role of pressure groups and policy elites. On the other hand, Elizabeth Borgwardt points out larger developments within society which affected the transformation of public opinion. She highlights the “New Deal response to the Great Depression and the transformative effect of

America's wartime experiences," since the "New Deal reshaped American perceptions of the capacity of the central government to tackle seemingly intractable problems with large-scale institutional solutions," while the war "consolidated a national identity as a problem-solving, 'professional,' and pragmatic player on the world stage."²⁷² Still, intellectuals had a major role in shaping the conversations (and therefore, public opinion) on the conceivable outcomes, while those groups that mobilized from a wider array of society could make a greater impact. As we trace the exceptionalist discourse, this section highlights one such group of actors: the *Union for Democratic Action*, and its post-war successor, the *Americans for Democratic Action*, gathered left-liberal intellectuals, labor leaders, New Dealers, and in its later form, even influential figures of the Democratic Party such as Eleanor Roosevelt and FDR Jr., or rising politicians like future Vice President Hubert Humphrey. Formed originally in May 1941 to counter the isolationism of the *America First Committee*, the UDA, chaired by Reinhold Niebuhr, embraced a strongly anti-totalitarian line, which distinguished it from other "Popular Front" advocates who favored stronger cooperation with Communists after Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union. Although the UDA also supported the tactical alliance with Stalin, they had fewer illusions about post-war cooperation, and Niebuhr explicitly did not want to open up the organization to "communist infiltration."²⁷³ The radical leftist background of many participants (Lewis Corey was one of them) provided a continuity with earlier radical discourses, while their emphasis on the interconnectedness of issues, domestic and international, economic and political, foreshadowed the organizing principles of the post-war "global New Deal." Indeed, in its first program statement, the group announced their intention to support all-out aid to the allies; to oppose the "America First" movement that became "wittingly or unwittingly Hitler's

²⁷² Robert A. Divine, *Second Chance: The Triumph of Internationalism in America during World War II* (New York: Atheneum, 1967); Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, p. 77.

²⁷³ Steve M. Gillon, *Politics and Vision: The ADA and American Liberalism, 1947-1985* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 11.

strongest ally;” to defeat isolationist congressional candidates; to stress the “eight-point declaration” of Roosevelt’s and Churchill’s Atlantic Charter; and to begin “preparedness for the post-war emergency.”²⁷⁴ The UDA was centered on three interrelated ideas which will be further elaborated below: the need for a forceful defense of democracy against totalitarian dangers; the view – inherited from the leftist legacies – that there was no road back to the pre-crisis capitalist system as new economic arrangements were necessary at home and abroad to prevent a cataclysm similar to the Great Depression and the war; and the position that these goals can only be achieved through a long-term American commitment to international order, and thus insulation was no longer viable.

A REINVIGORATION OF DEMOCRACY

Chapter 2 has shown how a major group among radical leftists transformed their discourse on America from a critique of capitalism to the renewal of democracy by the late 1930s. When in late 1940, Lewis Corey, together with Niebuhr and others, began drafting an “Outline of a program for progressives” from which the UDA grew out, “The Issue of Democracy” – a subtitle for the outline – obviously came to the fore. In this draft, Corey laid out an agenda to counter totalitarianism “whether fascist or communist [with] the recreation of democracy through its redefinition and redirection to solve the economic and moral problems of our age.”²⁷⁵ Thus, an anti-fascist and anti-communist left started to develop, which seemingly filled a void among intellectuals: for example, in a letter to Corey, Granville Hicks praised him for “after these many months of confusion in the Left, a position is defining itself,” while the historian Henry David remarked that it was “good to see the liberals and the radicals undertake the task of self-revitalization.”²⁷⁶ Next spring, UDA was launched with a program titled

²⁷⁴ “Victory for Democracy,” UDA program, 1941. *Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) papers, 1932-1965* (Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1979) Series 1, No. 48.

²⁷⁵ *Outline of a Program for Progressives*, November 1940, Lewis Corey papers, UDA materials, Box 10.

²⁷⁶ Granville Hicks to Lewis Corey, November 11, 1940; Henry David to Lewis Corey, November 14, 1940. Lewis Corey papers, UDA materials, Box 10.

“Victory for Democracy” – thus, even before America entered the war, the interventionist discourse was deeply connected to the reinvigoration of democracy.

During the war years, the UDA founders continued to elaborate their views on the peculiar characteristics of American democracy. In a war-time lecture, Corey, who only a few years earlier had still believed that a temporary “dictatorship of the proletariat” would be justifiable, now declared that “there is such a thing as the democratic idea in history carried over from one social system to another,” thus the praise for democracy could be reconciled with the criticism of capitalism. Partly as a self-reflection, he conceded that socialists had not “worked out a realistic and concrete approach to democracy,” but now he recognized that there was a peculiar democratic tradition in America, which was a “substitute for pre-[first world] war Socialism in Europe.”²⁷⁷ In his new book *The Unfinished Task*, he also reiterated his earlier revisionist approach to Marxism when he concluded that he had “come to distrust all doctrinaire absolutes,” and came to believe that “[d]emocracy, and democracy alone, has the intelligence, the capacity, and the will to shape economic reconstruction for greater welfare and freedom.”²⁷⁸

This understanding of democracy, of course, was more complex than a merely procedural one; the UDA program was grounded on the presupposition that political and economic institutions should mutually reinforce each other, thus, without democracy, economic reconstruction was not possible, but – as the interwar experiences showed – democracy itself could only survive in the long run if it was accompanied by steps toward greater economic justice. In this sense, the UDA was also critical of liberalism even if it aimed to redefine liberal politics for a new era. This was especially present in Niebuhr’s thinking: in a 1944 lecture series, later published as the book *The Children of Light and The Children of Darkness*, the UDA chairman argued

²⁷⁷ Lewis Corey, part of “Various Lectures” at Antioch College, 194(?) (fragment, date/title unknown, possibly 1940-41), pp. 31, 40-41. Lewis Corey Papers, Box 18.

²⁷⁸ Lewis Corey, *The Unfinished Task: Economic Reconstruction for Democracy* (New York: Viking Press, 1942), pp. vii-viii.

that “democracy has a more compelling justification and requires a more realistic vindication than is given it by the liberal culture with which it has been associated in modern history.” Niebuhr, from his peculiar religious point of view emphasizing the inevitability of human sin, outlined an argument about the limitations and imperfections of the democratic process, which, as he perhaps most famously declared, is mostly about “finding proximate solutions to insoluble problems.”²⁷⁹

Niebuhr’s concerns about liberalism’s disregard of power and overreliance on “rationality” was shared by Hans Morgenthau who elaborated his own realist political theory in *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* just as the war ended.²⁸⁰ Niebuhr and Morgenthau (a student of Carl Schmitt) both recognized the validity of the Schmittian criticism of parliamentary democracy though they also found a markedly different – yet admittedly imperfect – solution in the pluralism of the American tradition. Thus, they emphasized checks and balances through competing interests and power rather than mechanistic institutionalism, which also paved the way for their understanding of international relations. Still, Niebuhr believed that cynical and amoral approaches were not justified by the considerations of power:

The preservation of a democratic civilization requires the wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove. The children of light must be armed with the wisdom of the children of darkness but remain free from their malice. They must know the power of self-interest in human society without giving it moral justification. They must have wisdom in order that they may beguile, deflect, harness and restrain self-interest, individual and collective, for the sake of the community.²⁸¹

Niebuhr’s emphasis on the “power of self-interest” was a continuation of the line of thought that he originally began in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. There, he connected it with an almost-Marxian criticism of capitalism, and while his position softened, the UDA still believed

²⁷⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960 [1944]), p. 118. See also on Niebuhr’s understanding of democracy: Vibeke Schou Tjalve, *Realist Strategies of Republican Peace: Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and the Politics of Patriotic Dissent* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 89-94; Daniel A. Morris, *Virtue and Irony in American Democracy: Revisiting Dewey and Niebuhr* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015), pp. 100-108.

²⁸⁰ Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946)

²⁸¹ Niebuhr, *The Children of Light*, pp. 40-41.

that the fulfillment of democracy was inseparable from the issue of economic justice, which will now be discussed.

NEW ECONOMIC ARRANGEMENTS

The economic program of the UDA reflected the Marxist past of the founders, though it also distanced itself from Marxism in critical respects. In his outline, Corey reiterated that a “program of economic reconstruction for the United States is an integral part of our struggle for democracy against totalitarianism,” and while he recognized that the emergency measures of the New Deal overcame the immediate dangers, “action must go beyond emergency measures to full economic reconstruction.” Instead of the “totalitarian distortions” that characterized fascist and communist planning, he suggested a “democratic planning” that included “socialization of the great banks, a measure of government investment, and transformation of monopoly corporations into public service corporations with democratic administration by management and labor unions.”²⁸² In *The unfinished task*, Corey further elaborated on the “shape of a free economic order,” reconciling elements of free enterprise, the market, and planning. Clearly under the influence of New Deal ideas, he declared that there was “nothing final in the projected free economic order,” but it should be built through “pragmatic trial and error and the democratic clash of interest and ideas.” Emphasizing that “[n]o absolute solutions are desirable, or possible,” he eventually transplanted the Niebuhr/Morgenthau-type realist argument on the limitations of actions in a democracy to the economic sphere.²⁸³ Corey’s anti-statist turn was even recognized among more traditional liberal economists: in an exchange of letters with the University of Chicago economist Henry Simons, they agreed that the gap between the “old-fashioned liberals” and the “moderate socialists had narrowed” because – as Simons wrote – they came to share an “utter distrust of

²⁸² *Outline of a Program for Progressives*, pp. 6-7.

²⁸³ Corey, *The Unfinished Task*, p. 290.

stateism and an essentially international or unnationalistic point of view.” In a friendly response, Corey concurred that “[r]ecent events have shown where the old socialism, liberated from its shackles, may form a new synthesis with liberalism stripped from its own shackles. The central point of unity, obviously, is the opposition to Statism.”²⁸⁴

The question of a new economic order inevitably brought together domestic and international problems. In April 1942, under Niebuhr’s leadership, the UDA decided to commission studies on post-war reconstruction, concerning both the short- and long-term economic, military, political aspects of issues connected to “the international and economic organization of the world.” Among these, Corey was assigned to analyze “America within a framework of a New World Order,” with an emphasis on the necessary economic changes.²⁸⁵ Probably due to his illness around 1942-43, it is likely that this pamphlet was never produced; however, even the plans for the study underscore the level of seriousness of UDA’s involvement in post-war planning at this relatively early stage of American participation in WWII. While there were many different venues of post-war planning and the UDA can be considered among the more radical ones whose ideas were not necessarily translated into policies, their distinctive ideas were still recognized even at the level of government – as a letter written to Corey from John H. G. Pierson, the chief of the Postwar Division of the Department of Labor, testifies wherein the former’s work is praised by the latter.²⁸⁶ Ironically, the UDA’s contribution to the discourse also included a heightened awareness of the limits of planning and the dangers of statism:

²⁸⁴ Henry Simons to Lewis Corey, August 17, 1942; Lewis Corey to Henry Simons, September 20, 1942. Lewis Corey Papers, Box 19 (1942-43 Correspondence).

²⁸⁵ “Plans for Studies on Post-War Reconstruction for the Union of Democratic Action,” 1942. Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Box 12 (UDA Correspondence). Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC. Another copy of the same document can be found in: Lewis Corey Papers, Box 10 (UDA Materials). Reinhold Niebuhr also described to Corey his task as “the outline the kind of economic policy that we would have to follow domestically to fit into the framework of a new world order.” Reinhold Niebuhr to Lewis Corey, May 18, 1942. Lewis Corey Papers, Box 19 (1942-43 Correspondence).

²⁸⁶ John H. G. Pierson to Lewis Corey, Feb. 15, 1943. Lewis Corey Papers, Box 19 (1942-43 Correspondence). For various government-sponsored postwar planning, see: Burley, “Regulating the World,” pp. 130-141; Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, chapters 3-4. On the UDA being “ways more radical than many New Dealers deemed realistic,” see: Patel, *A New Deal*, p. 270.

whereas some liberals, following the New Deal's success, embraced a greater role for the state, ex-Communists became more concerned with the totalitarian threat embedded in it. Closely linked to this, they had fewer illusions about Stalin's post-war behavior, thus – while supporting a multilateralist international structure – they believed in an indispensable American commitment to any stable post-war order.

AMERICA'S ROLE WITHIN GLOBAL ORDER

While, in 1941, the UDA was formed to counter the isolationism of “America First” and to mobilize support for the allies, from the very beginning it also aimed to induce a more permanent transformation in America's approach to the world. In an early 1941 article, Niebuhr condemned a largely pacifist American Christianity for being “all too prone to disavow its responsibilities for the preservation of our civilization against the perils of totalitarian aggression,” and during the war, he extended the notion of *responsibility* to the whole of American foreign policy.²⁸⁷ Indeed, only nine days after Pearl Harbor, he suggested that the UDA should deal with the question “[w]hat can be done to prevent American irresponsibility toward the community of nations after the war?”²⁸⁸ This sentiment was reflected in the UDA-commissioned post-war studies mentioned above, which was echoed in a 1944 conference statement on the “special reasons why our nation should take the initiative in a more constructive foreign policy” after the end of the war:

America has a greater degree of immediate, yet no more ultimate, security than any other nation in a world of international anarchy. The immediate security tempts us to irresponsibility toward the community of nations. Two world wars have proved the error of this irresponsibility from both the standpoint of our own and the world's interests. [...] Our only hope, and the world's only hope, lies in moving forward to some genuine form of world order, which uses the experiences of mutuality gained in the war, and builds a more permanent structure upon this foundation.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Christian Faith and the World Crisis,” *Christianity and Crisis* 1(1) (February 10, 1941), p. 6.

²⁸⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr to James Loeb, December 16, 1941. Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Box 12 (UDA Correspondence)

²⁸⁹ UDA, ‘Democratic Objectives for World Order,’ Tentative Analysis to be submitted to the Conference at the Commodore Hotel, March 25, 1944. *ADA Papers*, Series I, No. 85.

Thus, a “genuine form of world order” was supposed to be built on a combination of universalism and particularism, since – as the UDA statement underlined – it was imagined in the context of a world organization, but also with an emphasis on the illusions of idealism which made a long-term American engagement necessary. While not directly involved in the UDA work, Max and Edna Lerner came to similar conclusions when they envisioned the United Nations as “the basis of a post-war order” which would mean “far more surrender of national sovereignty” than the League of Nations but still “would be something short of a world state leaving room both for regional and economic units and also for considerable diversity of political forms and cultural expansion.”²⁹⁰

However, while the Lerner still believed in the possibility of a greater cooperation with the Soviet Union as the war was over, Niebuhr and the UDA were more skeptical. In 1946, civil rights activist Alfred Baker Lewis suggested that the UDA should organize a conference to counter Communist arguments and to explain “that the purpose of Communist infiltration is to defend Russian imperialism,” while Niebuhr also wanted to “crystallize progressive and liberal leadership on a policy which will neither capitulate to Russia, nor aggravate the vicious circle of mutual fear in which we are involved.”²⁹¹ The conference finally took place in March 1947, when a renamed UDA (now *Americans for Democratic Action*) was enlarged with a stronger participation of labor leaders such as Walter Reuther of the *United Automobile Workers*. The ADA program continued to emphasize the coupling of liberty and economic security, as they claimed that “bread and freedom are ultimately interdependent.”²⁹² In practice, this meant a double support of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan which reflected the belief that

²⁹⁰ Max and Edna Lerner, *International Organization after the War: Roads to World Security* (Washington DC: National Council for the Social Studies, 1943), p. 30.

²⁹¹ Alfred Baker Lewis to James Loeb, April 16, 1946; Reinhold Niebuhr to Rabbi Stephen Wise, July 25, 1946. Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Box 12 (UDA Correspondence)

²⁹² Gillon, *Politics and Vision*, p. 12; “Excerpts of general policy statements adopted at the organizing conference of Americans for Democratic Action in Washington D.C., March 29-30, 1947,” Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Box 1 (ADA Correspondence)

European reconstruction must go hand in hand with a firm anti-Soviet policy. In this context, the divide between capitalism and socialism was secondary; as Corey noted with reference to the ADA program, “American foreign policy *must* work with liberal-socialist governments,” excluding, of course, Communists.²⁹³

In the 1948 presidential campaign, the ADA actively supported Truman’s re-election and spoke out against the candidacy of Henry Wallace while propagating a foreign policy line which combined the new containment ideas with their progressive legacies.²⁹⁴ In the long-run, it became a successful pressure group within the Democratic Party, though its intellectual strength soon faded, as leaders like Niebuhr gradually withdrew from daily activities. By this time, there was also a wider intellectual discourse, manifested in the pages of *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*, favoring similar policies.

Focus on America: Intellectuals after the War

The wider transformation of the intellectual discourse involved former radicals who “continued to treasure their radicalism and their sense of alienation, [but] they were becoming – however inadvertently – the champions of existing institutions at home and the defenders of American

²⁹³ Lewis Corey, “Toward a Liberal Program for Prosperity and Peace,” *The Antioch Review* 7 (2) (Summer 1947), p. 297.

²⁹⁴ “The free world faces a challenge from the Soviet Union and its international Communist instrumentalities,” said a 1948 ADA statement on foreign policy. “We are confident that the Soviet challenge can be met short of war. But this can be done only if the United States pursues a firm, clear-headed and affirmative policy in support of democracy and the United Nations. Containment, though indispensable to such a policy, cannot by itself produce peace. We must meet the moral challenge of the USSR with a positive faith in human values and individual rights. We must meet the economic challenge of the USSR with a program of effective action to cure the world’s economic ills. We must meet the political challenge of the USSR with a policy of unswerving support of genuinely democratic forces. [...] Our essential policy is not directed against the Soviet Union or any other nation but toward the creation of a lasting structure of international security.” “Foreign Policy,” adopted by ADA Convention, February 22, 1948. *ADA Papers*, Series IV, No. 16.

power abroad.”²⁹⁵ This shift resulted from a combination of America’s war-time experience, the increased recognition of the dangers of totalitarianism, while, for many ex-radicals, their own background in Communism also justified their distrust of Stalinism and its unwitting allies. Authors around *Partisan Review* came to believe that the United States was ill-prepared for the ideological battle against communism since a democratic society was disadvantaged compared to the propaganda organization at the disposal of the Soviet system. Therefore, Sidney Hook, who had already organized a Committee for Cultural Freedom in the 1930s, now extended it – as later emerged, with the active support of the CIA – to an international *Congress for Cultural Freedom*, sending the universalist message that it was “not a conflict between East and West but between free thought and enslavement.”²⁹⁶

The outbreak of the ideological Cold War also necessitated a re-evaluation of American culture by the former radicals. In *Commentary*, the magazine founded by Elliot Cohen in 1945 with the support of the American Jewish Committee, Mary McCarthy explained how American intellectuals, for the first time, “did not feel negative,” but rather “admired and liked” their country.²⁹⁷ In the recollection of Norman Podhoretz, a young critic this time who later became chief editor, intellectuals recognized that “[t]here was a world out there, which no one, it seemed, had bothered to look at before, and everyone, happily shedding his Marxist blinkers, went rushing out to look.”²⁹⁸ In 1952, *Partisan Review* ran a symposium titled “Our Country and Our Culture,” which was introduced by an editorial statement to the effect that intellectuals now “regard America and its institutions in a new way,” as they “now feel closer to their

²⁹⁵ Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and the 1950s* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), p. 72.

²⁹⁶ Sidney Hook, “The Berlin Congress for Cultural Freedom,” *Partisan Review* 17(7) (Sept-Oct 1950), p. 722. On the ideological battle, see also: William Barrett, “World War III: The Ideological Conflict,” *Partisan Review* 17(7) (Sept-Oct 1950), pp. 651-660. On the CIA’s role, see: Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer*, ch. 4.

²⁹⁷ Mary McCarthy, “America the Beautiful: The Humanist in the Bathtub,” *Commentary* (September 1947), p. 201.

²⁹⁸ Norman Podhoretz, *Making It* (London: J. Cape, 1968), p. 125.

country and its culture.” Thus, the question for the editors was how a sense of “critical non-conformism” could be kept alive amid an on-going “reaffirmation and rediscovery” of America.²⁹⁹ Some, like the ex-Trotskyist James Burnham responded that the United States was simply “the lesser evil,” and American culture had not become better, just “the world much worse.”³⁰⁰ Jacques Barzun and Horace Gregory pointed out that America was now “quite simply *the* world power,” which changed how Americans, even intellectuals, viewed their country; nevertheless, Irving Howe found “unacceptable” the uncritical celebration of American life though he was “pleased that [the PR editorial] ends with a call for non-conformism.”³⁰¹ (Howe soon parted ways with the PR circle as he remained committed to socialism and co-founded his own magazine, *Dissent*.) Still, other contributors began to find something valuable in the cultural and political life of America; mostly, in Lionel Trilling’s words, they appreciated the “virtual uniqueness of American security and well-being” but also even these previously alienated high-brow intellectuals started to warm towards American mass culture.³⁰²

The transformation was also related to the influx of the – to a large extent, but not exclusively, Jewish – *émigré* intellectuals during the war, who inserted their own unique point of view to the debates on America, adding to the recognition of both universal tendencies and American particularities. Having found refuge in the United States, they could more authentically highlight the contrast between the American conditions and the totalitarian menace over most of Europe.³⁰³ *Commentary*, as the magazine sponsored by the American Jewish Committee,

²⁹⁹ “Our Country and Our Culture,” editorial statement, *Partisan Review* 19(3) (May-June 1952), pp. 282-286.

³⁰⁰ James Burnham in “Our Country and Our Culture,” p. 290.

³⁰¹ Jacques Barzun, Horace Gregory in: “Our Country and Our Culture: Part II,” *Partisan Review* 19(4) (Jul-Aug 1952), pp. 426, 438; Irving Howe in: “Our Country and Our Culture: Part III,” *Partisan Review* 19(5) (Sep-Oct 1952), p. 581.

³⁰² Lionel Trilling in: “Our Country and Our Culture,” p. 319. David Riesman also celebrated America’s economic development and its “increasingly competent government.” *Ibid.*, pp. 310-311.

³⁰³ On totalitarianism, the major work was, of course, Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1951). For a reading of this text together with Karl Polanyi’s *The Great*

was especially invested in uniting the American experience with Jewishness: “Cohen’s fierce identification with America led him to believe that America was the community to which Jewish intellectuals should contribute.”³⁰⁴ In fact, *exceptionalism* was first mentioned in *Commentary* in the Jewish, not the American context.³⁰⁵ However, American uniqueness also came to the fore soon in the magazine’s articles. Already in 1946, the sociologist Daniel Bell – an active participant of the UDA during the war – observed a “reawakened national consciousness” among intellectuals, while Daniel Boorstin focused on America’s unique “intellectual heritage” in multiple articles.³⁰⁶ Boorstin – together with Louis Hartz and Richard Hofstadter – became one of the main exponents of the “consensus theory” in American historiography: a turn from the Progressive-era focus on class conflict to emphasize a unique American tradition built on Lockean liberal theory, devoid of ideological contestation.³⁰⁷ Therefore, the emerging post-war foreign policy consensus was also accompanied with a consensus on ideology, paving the way to discussions of exceptionalism.

Transformation as being “written to make safe the Enlightenment by discerning the sources of its insecurity,” see: Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment*, ch. 2, “The Origins of Dark Times.” On the influence of émigré intellectuals more generally, see: H. Stuart Hughes, *The Sea Change: The Migration of Social Thought, 1930-1965* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Anthony Heilbut, *Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America from the 1930s to the Present* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1997 [1983])

³⁰⁴ Abrams, *Commentary Magazine 1945-59*, p. 55.

³⁰⁵ William Poster in: James Grossmann, “The Jewish Writer and the English Literary Tradition: A Symposium, Part II,” *Commentary*, Oct. 1949.

³⁰⁶ Daniel Bell, “Review of ‘The Economic Mind in American Civilization: 1606-1695,’ by Joseph Dorfman,” *Commentary* (July 1946); Daniel Boorstin, “Review of ‘The American Temper: Patterns of Our Intellectual Heritage,’ by Richard D. Mosier,” *Commentary* (June 1953); Daniel Boorstin, “Review of ‘The American People in the Twentieth Century,’ by Oscar Handlin,” *Commentary* (Nov. 1954). On Bell’s activities in the UDA, see: Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), pp. 68-71.

³⁰⁷ There were, of course, variations of the “consensus thesis,” while, Hartz, as we will see below, believed that there was a single liberal ideology in America, Boorstin, in his *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), made the argument that American history was peculiarly ideology-free. But as a critic of Boorstin’s thesis claimed, “[i]n his desire to liberate the American past from ideology Boorstin has developed a theory of history that is itself an ideology.” John P. Diggins, “Consciousness and Ideology in American History: The Burden of Daniel J. Boorstin,” *The American Historical Review* 76(1) (1971), p. 117. See also: Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), pp. 437-466.

Immigrant intellectuals made two important contributions to the exceptionalist discourse, partly changing its meaning from the interwar usage. First, a discourse of *civilization* was revived: Friedrich Georg Friedmann, a cultural historian who left Nazi Germany in 1937, outlined a systematic analysis of American civilization and found that a peculiar lack of pre-history determined its special character. He argued that “the American community had a beginning at a particular moment of history in contrast with the traditional communities that, far from having a precise historical origin, rose out of the bottomless darkness of time in that long period of pre-history which is history, if at all, only in its latent and undeveloped stage.”³⁰⁸ This emphasis on the uniqueness of the *beginning* in the American Revolution also appeared in Hannah Arendt’s writings later: she saw the foundation of the American republic as an attempt to solve the problem of “an unconnected, new event breaking into the continuous sequence of historical time.”³⁰⁹ Second, exceptionalism was now connected directly to America’s changed *international position* in a post-war world. In a 1950 article to *Commentary*, the German historian Golo Mann found two distinct understandings of the notion in the American tradition: he argued that in contrast to a Jeffersonian version that could “degenerate into isolationism,” and which is based on the idea that America had to remain aloof from whatever was happening in the “hopelessly corrupt” Europe, there was also a “universalist” concept of American exceptionalism. According to Mann, this latter one proclaims that “America was to be a guide and beacon to the Old World pointing the way to the commonwealth of humanity,” which gained new meaning amid the crises of the 20th century:

For the American republic was founded in the very spirit that first proclaimed the unique character of the modern historical situation of man. It was the revolutionary spirit of the last decades of the 18th century, the spirit of Year One. The new republic was to set the example of the definitely right and true, worthy of imitation by all; such, for instance, was Immanuel Kant’s understanding. But this universalist

³⁰⁸ Friedrich Georg Friedmann, “America: A Country Without Pre-History,” *Partisan Review* 19(2) (March-Apr 1952), p. 141.

³⁰⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990 [1963]), p. 205.

exceptionalism had to do with the whole world of man, not with the privileged position of one particular region. This universal, global view has often been obscured in the course of the 19th century, but note how it has reappeared time and again in moments of crisis: under Lincoln, under Wilson, under Franklin Roosevelt. It is the type of exceptionalism which is adequate to the tasks of our age.³¹⁰

Thus, Mann rejected a particularist understanding of exceptionalism and embraced the universalist one. Moreover, he derived America's distinctive task from "moments of crisis," underlining the temporal delineation between "normal" and "exceptional" periods. However, his interpretation also highlighted a seemingly paradoxical aspect of this "universalist" exceptionalism: what was, then, exceptional in the conduct of America? Was it just the world situation, or did it stem from some inner characteristics? In Max Lerner's detailed study, the *civilizational* approach was tied to a focus on the *international position*, connecting the particular with the universal.

"America as a Civilization": Exceptionalism in Terms of Order

Previously we have seen that Max Lerner still emphasized the universal validity of "world trends" against America's supposedly exceptional situation in his 1939 book *It Is Later Than You Think*; however, by the end of the next decade, his approach changed significantly. At least since 1945, he was working on projects titled *America, America* and *Letters from America* – both were precursors to his vast thousand-page volume *America as a Civilization*, which was finally published in 1957.³¹¹ Among various other themes, this book introduced a new understanding for the concept of *exceptionalism*, which became the main reference point for many authors contributing to the discourse in the following decades. Lerner's change in

³¹⁰ Golo Mann, "The American Credo Survives the Modern Crisis: The 'Great Exception' in a New Version," *Commentary* (Apr. 1950).

³¹¹ Max Lerner, *America as a Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957). The drafts of his earlier projects are available at: Max Lerner Papers (MS 322), Box 64, Folders 1714-1715. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

emphasis was part of the wider intellectual transformation outlined in the previous section: as his biographer Sanford Lakoff notes, “he took a decidedly more favorable view of the country and its role in the world” during the 1940s partly because of the New Deal’s success, but also because world events – most importantly, the war – “cast the United States in the role of the savior of not only democracy, but of civilization itself,” which was further reinforced by his disillusionment with Stalinism by the time of the early Cold War period.³¹² Still, his outspoken celebration of American civilization was a novelty among his intellectual peers: Lerner himself also admitted this in the *PR* symposium when he remarked that “a number of friends who are more less ‘Left’ (and, of course, the Europeans) consider [the title of his forthcoming book] as a bad joke.” (“Do we have one?” they were asking him about America’s *civilization*.)³¹³ Thus, after the war, he moved further to the particularistic side of exceptionalism.

This was noticed by Louis Hartz, whose own classic *The Liberal Tradition in America* is also often recognized as a major contribution to the exceptionalist discourse. In the 1955 work, a prime example of the “consensus thesis,” Hartz argued that a single hegemonic liberal tradition defined the boundaries of political contestation in the United States, which was primarily caused by America’s lack of a feudal past, an argument that was foreshadowed in the descriptions of American social development by Tocqueville and Engels. Thus, it is not by chance that Samuel Huntington said later that Hartz “used Marxist categories to arrive at Tocquevillian conclusions.”³¹⁴ However, interestingly, Hartz himself only used the term “exceptionalism” in his critique of Marxism with a reference to Lerner’s argument in *It Is Later Than You Think*: Hartz here contended that American Marxists (like Lerner) had been blind to

³¹² Sanford Lakoff, *Max Lerner: The Pilgrim in the Promised Land* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 159.

³¹³ Max Lerner in: “Our Country and Our Culture: Part III,” p. 582.

³¹⁴ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991 [1955]); Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 7. For the similar argument by Engels, see Chapter 1, p. 52, fn. 114.

the very real differences between American and European capitalist development because of their “hatred of the ‘exceptionalism’ which would exclude America from the Marxian apocalypse.”³¹⁵ Hence, for Hartz, Lerner was too much on the side of universalism in his pre-war book, whereas in his later works, the pendulum swung to the opposite end, and Hartz – reading his new manuscript – also noted the irony:

“Exceptionalism” is of course an old preoccupation of yours, and I have no essential quarrel with your current version of it. I would say, though, that in your own analysis you are probably a bit more of an “exceptionalist” than your discussion here would justify. Ultimately the point I would like to see made is this: exceptionalism and integration into the Western pattern are polar facets of the same analysis. There is no concept of American uniqueness which can be divorced from the contrasting variation of Western Europe; and as soon as you get into those variations you have gotten into a common framework of analysis.³¹⁶

Therefore, in Hartz’s view, a comparative analysis was missing in both cases: neither the analysis based on Marxist universalism nor the America-centric particularism could explain in what sense America differed from Europe. However, Lerner’s complex argument did not see exceptionalism as something contradictory to a “broader Western pattern,” but he understood it in the sense of “what is *characteristically* American.” His intention was to demonstrate that America was a “culture in its own right, with many characteristic lines of power and meaning of its own, ranking with Greece and Rome as one of the great distinctive civilizations of history.”³¹⁷ This way, he connected the universal to the particular, which was further underlined in his conception of order.

Lerner’s analysis rested on three important sources. First, it was based on a discourse of *civilization* – a term that he took directly from Charles and Mary Beard, and which, for him, referred to a distinctive American civilization, even if it was also embedded in the broader Western one. The America-centered view was, of course, also a reflection of the nationalist

³¹⁵ Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition*, pp. 277-283. (Quote is from: p. 280.)

³¹⁶ Louis Hartz to Max Lerner, November 15, 1955. Max Lerner Papers, Box 4, Folder 172. See also: Lakoff, *Max Lerner*, p. 183.

³¹⁷ Lerner, *America as a Civilization*, pp. 65; 59. (Emphasis in original.)

mood of the New Deal era: as the “American way of life” was increasingly celebrated, universities set up departments and programs on American civilization, “focusing on a combination of history, literature, and law.”³¹⁸ Lerner began teaching such a course at Brandeis University in the 1940s. He used “exceptionalism” in several lecture notes and syllabi that served as a precursor for his book, even including it in exam questions.³¹⁹ Nevertheless, as his drafts and notes testify, he was struggling with the use of the “exceptionalist” term. In a 1952 review of an edited volume on *Socialism and American life*, he still referred to it in the narrower, Marxist context;³²⁰ while it is also revealing how the section that in *America as a Civilization* appeared under the heading “American exceptionalism” was changed during the writing process. In an earlier draft, Lerner made the argument:

I am not urging an “exceptionalism” such as has been the pious theme of most of the spread-eagle theorists who have sought to depict America as somehow immune from the forces of history and the laws of life. This theory of “exceptionalism” is one of the idea-weapons forged by the oligarchs in the struggle with the democratic forces. ... “America is different” has been the unfailing cry of defense against the challenge alike of trade-union organization and Marxist theory, against the warnings of the catastrophe in the business-cycle and of the abuse of business power in the maximizing of profits and the expense of purchasing power. In that sense I do not subscribe to [the] theory of American exceptionalism.³²¹

However, in the final product, this “theory” of exceptionalism became only a “distorted version,” contrasted with similarly extreme views coming mostly from the left:

If I do not subscribe to the cry of “America is doomed,” neither am I pleading for the *distorted version* of “American exceptionalism” which has been the pious theme of spread-eagle theorists seeking to depict America as immune from the forces of history and the laws of life. This *version* of exceptionalism is easily used as an idea weapon in the anti-democratic struggle ... the cry that “America is different” has been an unfailing answer to any challenge that might disturb the structure of existing power, and the carriers of the challenge have been regarded as “un-American,” “alien,” and therefore “subversive.”

³¹⁸ Patel, *The New Deal*, p. 257.

³¹⁹ Midterm examination, Brandeis University, Social Science B. January 23, 1950. Max Lerner Papers, Box 69, Folders 1792-1794. (Lecture notes and syllabi can also be found there.)

³²⁰ However, in the 1952 review, he was already moving toward a more objective point of view when he said that “[o]ne might have expected ... someone to grapple with the difficult problem of American ‘uniqueness’ or ‘exceptionalism,’ since it would be hard to think of a better test ground for the validity or falsity of these doctrines than the fate of socialism in America.” Max Lerner, “Review of ‘Socialism and American Life,’ eds. Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons,” *American Quarterly* 4(3) (Autumn 1952), p. 270.

³²¹ Max Lerner, Drafts for “America as Civilization,” manuscript, ch. XII, pp. 670-671. Max Lerner Papers, Box 69, Folder 1785.

Therefore, while earlier, Lerner had meant by exceptionalism a reactionary ideological tool evoked to suppress progressive changes by denying universally valid laws, by the mid-1950s he found other possibilities, as he emphatically added that “these distortions should not blind us to the valid elements in the theory of exceptionalism.”³²²

Second, these “valid elements” were discovered as he drew on new behaviorist works in the social sciences, especially on studies of “national characteristics,” in which peculiar American character traits were analyzed. In 1942, the anthropologist Margaret Mead published *And Keep Your Powder Dry*, a conscious attempt to understand her own country amid the turmoil of war, which was followed by similar arguments made by Geoffrey Gorer and David Potter on issues such as the immigrant experience, America’s supposedly unique economic abundance and perceptions on social mobility.³²³ In a 1953 *Commentary* article, William Petersen also noted that despite the very real limitations caused by cultural and income differences, America remained relatively mobile while “the recurrent issue of ‘American exceptionalism,’ as it is termed in Comintern jargon, would indicate that Marxism suffered the greatest revert in the attempt made to apply it to America.”³²⁴ For Lerner, this reinforced the need to reinterpret exceptionalism to reflect “[t]he fact ... that while American civilization is not immune to the surging beat of world forces, it has developed its own characteristic institutions, traits, and social conditions within the larger frame.”³²⁵

At the same time, this larger frame provided the third major source of his study: the changed international environment which elicited a reconsideration of America’s global role, hence, his

³²² Lerner, *America as a Civilization*, p. 65. Emphasis added.

³²³ Margaret Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry: An Anthropologist Looks at America* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000 [1942]); Geoffrey Gorer, *The American People: A Study in National Character* (New York: Norton, 1964 [1948]); David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954)

³²⁴ William Petersen, “The Study of Man: Is America Still the Land of the Opportunity,” *Commentary* (Nov. 1953).

³²⁵ Lerner, *America as a Civilization*, p. 65.

final chapter was about “America as a World Power.” He argued for a middle ground between the discredited isolationism and missionary activism, therefore, suggesting a broadening of the realist conception of the national interest to

include America’s stake in international action and in the building of collective sanctions. In an anarchic world the drive to achieve international order became itself a form of realism. That may be why some of the chief protagonists of the national-interest concept have broken as many lances against the isolationists as against the “tender-minded” internationalists.³²⁶

The form that he found was a combination of universalism and particularism, a “constitutional imperialism operating within a relatively open world constitutional structure,” which can remind us of the types of arguments that Ikenberry and Ruggie made several decades later about an international order built on America’s relatively rules-based liberal hegemony.³²⁷ Therefore, in Lerner’s book, exception and order were connected to each other and America’s exceptional character was balanced with a responsibility for the post-war order that it had created.

The problem of “America and the world,” of course, was a central issue in other works as well and not everyone shared Lerner’s optimism. In the last chapter of *The liberal tradition*, Hartz was less sure whether the United States could meet its responsibility, as he closed his argument by asking: “Can a people ‘born equal’ ever understand peoples elsewhere that have to become so?”³²⁸ Furthermore, in a letter to Lerner, Hartz called his analysis “too optimistic” as it “obscures many real problems which the country has to face;” George Kennan also disagreed with Lerner’s portrayal of the U.S. as “the powerful country in world affairs.”³²⁹ While agreeing with most of the final chapter, Niebuhr also contested the assessment that America’s pragmatic traditions could limit its messianic impulses and debated the claim that American

³²⁶ Ibid., p. 897.

³²⁷ Ibid., p. 893; Ruggie, *Winning the Peace*, pp. 47-49; Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*.

³²⁸ Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition*, p. 309.

³²⁹ Louis Hartz to Max Lerner, August 13, 1956; George Kennan to Max Lerner, Jan. 25, 1955. Max Lerner Papers, Box 4, Folders 172, 207.

messianism did not “exceed the messianism of other great nations.”³³⁰ By this time, Niebuhr – similarly to Kennan – became critical of the direction of American foreign policy; in the *PR* symposium, he pointed out that the United States had rapidly become the greatest power “without apprenticeship,” which itself carried dangers though he admitted that the Soviet Union was a “ruthless and intransigent foe” which tempted even the “most critical and sophisticated patriot ... to become an uncritical one.”³³¹

Niebuhr’s criticism of American overconfidence and complacency was further outlined in *The Irony of American History*: here, he rejected the kind of understanding of exceptionalism that appeared in Lerner’s book as he stated that “[t]he American dream is not particularly unique. Almost every nation had a version of it.”³³² On the other hand, Niebuhr believed that the American experience

represents a particularly unique and ironic refutation of the illusion in all such dreams. The illusions about the possibility of managing historical destiny from any particular standpoint in history, always involve ... miscalculations about both the power and the wisdom of the managers and of the manageability of the historical “stuff” which is to be managed.

Consequently, for Niebuhr, the *irony* stemmed from the fact that although America indeed “acquired a greater degree of power than any other nation in history,” it was still “less completely master of its own destiny than was a comparatively weak America.”³³³ In a similar fashion, Daniel Boorstin rejected the approaches of both the “Universalists” and what he called the “Singularists” (who would still proclaim that “the United States remains singular among the nations of the world”) as he rather favored a third way, outlined by “Pluralists” who were “aware that we are and have always been only one among many nations; and they respect the differences.” He found these themes in the writings of Niebuhr, Kennan, and Morgenthau who all emphasized self-limitation and warned “against being obsessed either by uniqueness or by

³³⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr to Max Lerner, November 8, 1954. Max Lerner Papers, Box 6, Folder 314.

³³¹ Reinhold Niebuhr in: “Our Country and Our Culture,” pp. 302-303.

³³² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner, 1952), p. 38.

³³³ Ibid., p. 72.

the perils of it.”³³⁴ Thus, as realists, Niebuhr, Kennan and Morgenthau were skeptical about the order that Lerner envisioned; still, both Niebuhr and Morgenthau mostly praised Lerner’s work with – interestingly – Morgenthau noting that apart from the material conditions, he would have also emphasized the “intellectual, moral and spiritual factors which have transformed the potential of geography, manpower etc. into the actuality of American power.”³³⁵ However, Lewis Corey, who was working on a manuscript titled *Toward an Understanding of America* in the final years before his death in 1953, shared Lerner’s more optimistic outlook: he agreed with Niebuhr that the United States was “unprepared” for the world leadership that it “unwillingly assumed,” but added that for this reason “the amazing thing is not that USA made plenty of mistakes since 1945 ... but that mistakes, although deplorable, were neither plentiful nor disastrous and that in spite of them USA has developed the elements of a world policy and unity of resistance to Communist imperialism.”³³⁶

Therefore, while tackling it in different terms and with a somewhat different outlook for American foreign policy, these authors all problematized how the universalist aims (often retained from their Marxist legacy) could be reconciled within particularistic conditions of the post-war world: how the United States could remain unique in an international order built on both pluralism and universal values. Embracing the new consensus, of course, also served as a legitimization of the American-led order which often demanded sacrificing their more progressive ideas, even if, in its rhetoric, U.S. foreign policy proclaimed the universal relevance of American values, in practice, the Cold War logic prescribed unworthy alliances and uneasy compromises. However, the uncertainties of the nuclear age seemed to justify this position,

³³⁴ Daniel Boorstin, “Democracy and its Discontents: IV. The U.S.A.,” *Encounter* (July 1954), pp. 16; 20-21.

³³⁵ Hans Morgenthau to Max Lerner, November 23, 1954. Max Lerner Papers, Box 6, Folder 296.

³³⁶ Lewis Corey, *Toward an Understanding of America*, p. 22. Manuscript. Lewis Corey Papers, Box 11.

which manifested in the peculiarly realist vision of exceptionalism in the era, which will be highlighted in the conclusion.

Conclusion: A Realist Exception

The threat of nuclear annihilation and the outbreak of hot conflicts amid the Cold War in places like Korea fundamentally altered the frames of political action as authors like Arendt, Niebuhr, or Lerner pointed out. This led to a recognition of *limits* but, paradoxically, also served as the justification for the build-up of an almost limitless national security state which, in some ways, made war-time exceptions permanent. The delineation between normal and exceptional times was fractured; as Clinton Rossiter argued, the nuclear age demanded new sets of rules – even in the form of mechanisms for “constitutional dictatorship” – for exigencies.³³⁷ Already in 1941, Harold Lasswell considered the possibility that the general trend was a move toward “a world of ‘garrison states’ – a world in which the specialists of violence are the most powerful group of society.” Although the United States did not turn into this quasi-totalitarian dystopia, the “astonishing” “ambitions, reach, and abilities” of what Katznelson called the newly-built “crusader state” was frightening enough even for Eisenhower to warn against the dangers of a “military-industrial complex” in his farewell address two decades later.³³⁸ The gravity of the situation led to an interpretation of exceptionalism in the spirit of a broader realist tradition.

³³⁷ Clinton L. Rossiter, “Constitutional Dictatorship in the Atomic Age,” *The Review of Politics* 11(4) (October 1949), pp. 395-418; Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, pp. 465-466.

³³⁸ Harold D. Lasswell, “The Garrison State,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 46(4) (Jan. 1941), p. 455; Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, p. 481; Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Farewell Address*, Jan. 17, 1961. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/dwightdeisenhowerfarewell.html>. In a reflection on Lasswell’s fears, Aaron Friedberg argues that the “garrison state” was prevented because of nuclear weapons and deterrence which made it possible for a “contract state” to emerge. Aaron Friedberg, “Why Didn’t the United States Become a Garrison State?” *International Security* 16(4) (Spring 1992), pp. 109-142.

In an age when the concern was nothing less than the very survival of humankind, universalist ideas inevitably arose, even if they needed to be reconciled with the particularism of the said realist tradition. Just as Lerner was finishing his book, he wrote a pessimistic note on the “latter-day man,” of a “degenerating” society overshadowed by the prospects of technological destruction (although he claimed that the “crisis in the condition of society ... is as grave as the crisis of survival wrought by the H-bomb”).³³⁹ In this article, he argued that whereas America was a distinct civilization, its “uniqueness lies not in the differences of America in nature and destiny from other civilizations, but in the wide margin of its lead in technology and power, and the fact that it has become the carrier of many world changes.”³⁴⁰ Indeed, even his conceptualization of exceptionalism balanced an emphasis on peculiar character traits with a focus on the “common conditions of the modern world” from which the exception was defined through America’s unique “acceleration of energy and power.”³⁴¹ In this sense, Hughes is right to conclude that the post-war exceptionalist discourse was a product of America’s rise to power. At the same time, this chapter also showed that it was grounded on a leftist understanding which was gradually transformed to include an appreciation of democracy and a sense of responsibility. However, while in the original Marxist meaning, the “exceptionalist” always referred to someone other in a form of condemnation, Lerner came to embrace the term, or at least he recognized some valid elements in it. For the first time, thus, exceptionalism partly became self-referential: those who used it also started to believe in it – though Lerner’s measured attitude was far from the celebratory rhetoric that was later connected to the concept. In the end, it was a peculiarly *realist* understanding in which exception and order were intertwined, essentially confirming the logic of the post-war order, thus, in this case, exception

³³⁹ Max Lerner, “The Flowering of Latter-Day Man,” *The American Scholar* 25(1) (Winter 1955-56), p. 24.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁴¹ Lerner, *America as a Civilization*, p. 64.

truly meant to *prove* the rule (where “rule” can be understood both as “regularity” and as the legitimacy of American hegemony).

However, in two important ways, exceptionalism remained unchanged from its earlier iterations. It was still an *intellectual* construct, appearing in the works of intellectuals, which also reveals something about how they viewed their role themselves, as attested by Corey’s final thoughts in *Toward an Understanding of America*:

The primary responsibility is on American intellectuals – to clarify American understanding of the problems of its world responsibility, to submerge “American” anti-Americanism and give the world a truthful picture of the USA, for upon understanding America and working with liberal democracy depends our own future and the future of the world.³⁴²

Nevertheless, it was also a *political* task: while, earlier, exceptionalism served to delineate the line between true believers in Marxism and “heretics,” now it was closely linked to proposed domestic and foreign policies. Intellectuals who engaged in the discourse were also politically active in promoting their favored solutions and candidates, as exemplified in the case of the UDA/ADA in this chapter.

Returning to our earlier chart on the discourse-tracing of American exceptionalism (see Figure 3), the top dimension (*international structure* and world history) involves the transformation between the crises of World War II and the early Cold War within the time-period that was examined here. These crises contributed to permanent transformations on the level of both *domestic and foreign policies*. The build-up of a national security state and the emergence of containment altered the conditions under which debates on U.S. politics took place. The new challenges and the interwar experiences also elicited an activist and to some extent universalist response – though particularism did not disappear, either at policy levels nor in rhetoric (McCarthyism is a prominent example here). The third level has been the level of the *radical discourse*: here, exceptionalism moved to the ideas of *ex-radicals*, as manifested in such

³⁴² Corey, *Toward an Understanding of America*, p. 24.

activities as organizing interest groups like the UDA or the CCF, and in such forums as the pages of *Commentary* and *Partisan Review*. Continuing their path of the 1930s, intellectuals indeed discovered America especially in the early Cold War period, this new loyalty to the United States was the result of a focus on democracy, economic arrangements, and a reconsideration of America's role in the world. Exceptionalism, as appeared in Lerner's work, partly stemmed from this discourse, and also from the new *ideational contributions* outlining tenets of realism in international relations and traits of national character in anthropology. At the same time, *political struggles* still constantly played a role: even if the period between 1941 and the late 1950s, retrospectively, is seen as an era of consensus, debates on intervention and post-war involvement (in the early Cold War) did not completely disappear.

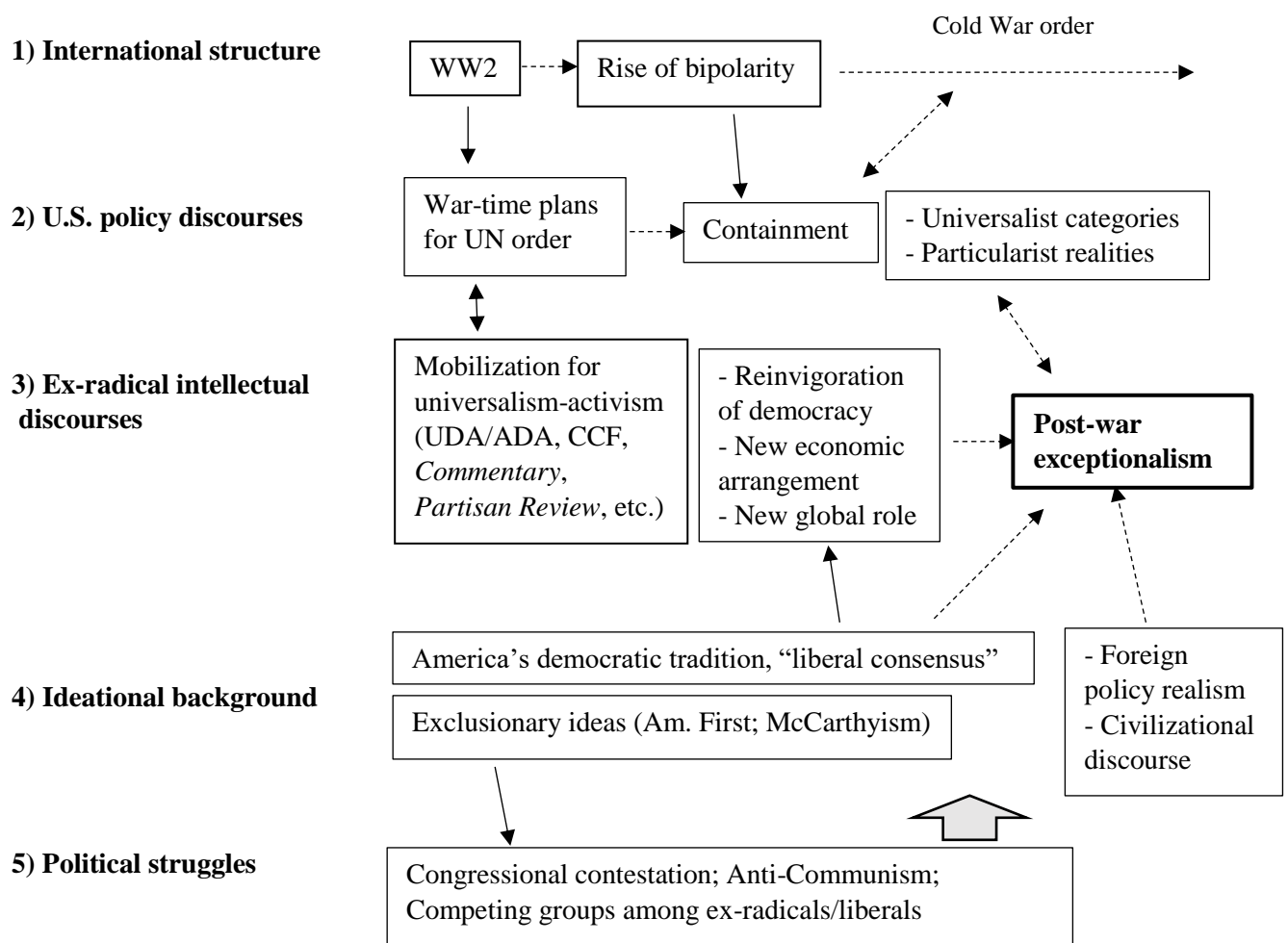


Figure 3. The discourse-tracing of American exceptionalism (1941-60).

The new turn in the exceptionalist discourse was both a product of the American-led post-war order and a tool for its legitimation; Lerner's argument, as well as the broader intellectual currents, responded to a perceived tension between the universalist necessities dictated by the conditions of a nuclear age and the particularistic realities of a bipolar world. In this sense, it was indeed a reflection on America's increased power, but the change in power in itself was not enough to explain the new emphasis: it was also caused by ideational developments. However, the next change in the discourse came with the crisis of the Cold War order: by the mid-1970s, America's leadership position was questioned from various angles, which cast doubts on its exceptional status. Nevertheless, American exceptionalism was ultimately reaffirmed, which is the subject of the analysis in Chapter 4. As the exceptionalist discourse returned with renewed vigor, its new articulation arguably missed the pragmatism, self-awareness, and self-limitation suggested by its earlier advocates. A realist understanding of exceptionalism that connected exception to order might have been forgotten just after it was outlined.

Chapter 4 –

Not Dead: The Crisis of the Post-War Order and the Revival of Exceptionalism (1960-79)

“Oh, the revolution was here
That would set you free from those bourgeoisie
In the morning everything’s clearer
When the sunlight exposes your age”³⁴³

In his 1961 inauguration address, John F. Kennedy reiterated the universalist-activist Cold War consensus in unambiguous terms: “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty.”³⁴⁴ However, by the time the United States celebrated the 200th anniversary of its independence fifteen years later, this consensus had broken down as the post-war order was in turmoil: in the wake of America’s first major defeat in a war in more than a century and amid the resignation of both a sitting president and vice president during the same cycle, which elevated the unelected Gerald Ford to the presidency, the “American myth” itself was questioned. Internal disturbances stemming from racial conflicts and the exhaustion of the Bretton Woods system under the burdens of the Vietnam War also contributed to the crisis of the 1970s: the first major economic downturn of the post-war period brought about an unprecedented parallel rise of both inflation and unemployment, triggering a re-assessment of the costs of America’s global leadership.

This was the context in which America’s exceptional nature was also questioned: in 1975, Daniel Bell proclaimed “the end of American exceptionalism,” while his friend and co-editor, Irving Kristol similarly stated that the conduct of Henry Kissinger as secretary of state symbolized “the end of the idea of ‘American exceptionalism.’”³⁴⁵ Indeed, as the limitations

³⁴³ LCD Soundsystem, “American Dream,” *American Dream*, DFA Records, 2017.

³⁴⁴ John F. Kennedy, *Inauguration Address*, January 20, 1961.

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kennedy.asp. See also: McCricken, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 24.

³⁴⁵ Bell, “The end of American exceptionalism,” pp. 193-224; Kristol is quoted in: Uwe Nerlich, “Western Europe’s Relations with the United States,” *Daedalus* 108(1) (Winter 1979), p. 100.

on its role as the manager of global order were becoming increasingly clear, the U.S. could not remain the exception that *proved* the rule, while the uncertainties regarding its political system also threatened its status as the one that *defies* the laws of history, i.e. the inevitable fall of great powers.

Yet the exceptionalist discourse did not die out. On the contrary, in the years following Bell's article, exceptionalism was reaffirmed forcefully with an emphasis on the surviving elements of America's uniqueness. While the term almost completely disappeared from the intellectual debates between 1965 and 1975 (and even in those rare cases of being mentioned, it was only evoked to be rejected), it returned with renewed vigor and with new meanings around the time of America's bicentennial.³⁴⁶ Moreover, members of the foreign policy elite also picked up the concept in an effort to reorient America's external relations in accordance with the changed circumstances. What explains this resurgence of the exceptionalist discourse? In the previous chapters, we have seen that this originally Marxist term was used to stigmatize political opponents, to demarcate the line between true believers and "heretics," and to justify or to legitimize an emerging construction of order built upon some sort of tension between universalist and particularist principles. These instances showed that crisis, exception and order are inherently interconnected. This chapter shows how the relationship between these was reinterpreted in the predicament of the mid-1970s, following the exhaustion of the post-war arrangements. Thus, *the return of exceptionalism can be understood in the context of a reassertion of a belief in American purpose and the redefinition of America's global role in a changed Cold War order while maintaining a balance between universalism and particularism.*

³⁴⁶ In the 1966-74 period, *The New York Times* had only one mention of "American exceptionalism" and even there, it was only raised to be repudiated; however, in 1975-76, four articles cited the concept. *Encounter* had one mention in 1968 (but also in a negative context: see later in the chapter) and then, in 1975 and 1977, exceptionalism returned. In the pages of *Commentary*, "exceptionalism" did not appear between 1966 and 1974, but came up in three articles in 1975-79. In 1977, *Partisan Review* had two articles that used the concept, the first such instance since 1957.

This chapter traces the exceptionalist discourse amid the crisis of the Cold War order. Thus, the argument presented here pays attention to the individual innovations which, under certain structural conditions, can induce permanent shifts in the understanding of America's position within the world order. This will be elaborated in three major points. First, I will show that the Cold War consensus was replaced with a contestation over America's global role both along the activism-withdrawal and the universalism-particularism dimensions of my framework. While Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger aimed to liberate the understanding of the national interest from the moralistic elements of the "American tradition," the human-rights rhetoric of the Carter administration re-embraced the universalistic component, whereas neoconservatives outlined a particularist though activist position. Second, these new interpretations of universalism and particularism were elaborated in the context of the resurgence of ideology in American politics: as the liberal consensus was shattered, competing explanations and conflict came to the fore in intellectual discussions. Furthermore, domestic and foreign upheavals contributed to the rise of a "New Left." However, for reasons to be outlined below, the "New Left" did not engage in a similar exceptionalist discourse as the "Old Left" had, thus, the question of socialism did not become a central element of exceptionalism again. Third, the debate over the reinterpretation of the American purpose culminated in the discussions around America's bicentennial in 1976 in the wake of Watergate and the retreat from Vietnam. This was the context in which Bell outlined his argument on the "end" of American exceptionalism to which others reacted with a reaffirmation of the notion. The "Bicentennial Debate" will be examined by highlighting the dichotomies of the universal and the particular, public and private interest, virtue and corruption, that all came to the center, eliciting responses that emphasized *ambiguity* and *complexity*. These ambiguities and complexities were also reflected in the debates on foreign policy. Thus, I will conclude the chapter by showing how foreign policy

intellectuals redefined America's commitments for a new order by building on earlier exceptionalist discourses.

The Breakdown of the Consensus: Alternatives in the 1960s and 70s

As was seen previously, power shifts alone – though they play an undoubtedly important role – cannot explain the turns of the exceptionalist discourse: this chapter will show that exceptionalism returned to the fore precisely at a time when America's power was perceived to be weakening. Relatedly, the crisis of the Cold War order revived theories that conceived U.S. foreign policy as taking pendulum swings between two different end-points, both considered as manifestations of exceptionalist beliefs: according to those, a tradition of “isolationism” alternates with that of “interventionism” (or, in Stanley Hoffmann's terms, “quietism” and “activism”). Most often, this is related to cyclical understandings of political behavior, or, more specifically, in foreign policy conduct: in this sense, “active” phases necessarily lead to overexpansion and disappointment, changing the dominant mood to favor constraints on action if not outright withdrawal.³⁴⁷ The two faces of exceptionalism are often related to two distinct sources of American identity, an “exemplary” and a “missionary” one.³⁴⁸ However, Restad convincingly challenges this portrayal of U.S. history by pointing out that the

³⁴⁷ The cyclical theory was first outlined in the form of alternations between periods of “extroversion” and “introversion” in American foreign policy in: Frank L. Klingberg, “The Historical Alternation of Moods in American Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 4(2) (Jan. 1952), pp. 239-273. Stanley Hoffmann used “activism” and “quietism” as two faces of exceptionalism in his *Gulliver's Troubles*, pp. 95; 190-208; and see also his *Primacy or World Order*, p. 6. H. W. Brands called the two schools “exemplar” and “vindicator” in *What America Owes the World: The Struggle for the Soul of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. vii-viii. See also: Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History*, pp. 23-48; Albert O. Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 7-11.

³⁴⁸ McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 8-14; Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*; Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History*, pp. 3-22. (Schlesinger makes a distinction between a tradition of “experiment” and a counter-tradition of “destiny.”)

U.S. *was* in fact quite active internationally in supposedly exemplary times, and by noting the inherent challenges to characterizing specific periods according to these categories.³⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the reading of the discourse of the 1960s and 70s below will highlight some alternatives arising amid the crisis. Even if the activist *outcome* was not affected, politicians like J. William Fulbright, as chairman of the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee, or George McGovern, as the 1972 Democratic presidential nominee – notwithstanding his landslide loss to Nixon, – *were* influential voices propagating a more restrained international posture. However, positions are more complicated than to be simply measured on a single isolationism vs. interventionism scale, thus, it makes sense to locate the alternative arguments along our two axes of activism-withdrawal and universalism-particularism (see Table 7).

Table 7. Positions on America’s foreign-policy role (1960-79).

	Universalism	Particularism
Activism	Old Cold War consensus (JFK, Johnson) Carter/Brzezinski	Early neoconservatives (Kristol, Kirkpatrick, Moynihan) Nixon/Ford/Kissinger
Withdrawal	Fulbright (“arrogance of power”), McGovern	Kennan; “reverse exceptionalism”

The early 1960s – and, more specifically, the Cuban Missile Crisis – are often seen as the height of the Cold War, while the policies and discourses embraced by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations can also be conceived as the height of the universalist-activist Cold War consensus. Although they recognized the particularistic realities of the bipolar system, Kennedy and Johnson did not merely invoke the rhetoric of universal values, they also did more than any of their predecessors to make domestic policies consistent with that rhetoric.

³⁴⁹ Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 66-67. See also: Hughes, “Unmaking an exception,” pp. 540-542.

Building on the mobilization of a massive civil rights movement, Johnson pushed through Congress a series of landmark legislations, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. While these measures faced substantial opposition (especially from Southern senators and representatives), they made significant progress in removing the racial and ethnic barriers of political participation and in approximating to the universalistic ideals inherent in the U.S. self-view. Although the tensions did not disappear (while the progress of the 1960s also elicited substantial backlash), the racial undertones of American citizenship were considerably softened.³⁵⁰ This progress was also reflected in immigration policies: the 1965 Immigration Act dismantled the legacies of the interwar “national origins” system and – albeit perhaps somewhat inadvertently – paved the way for a significant increase in the proportion of the foreign-born population. The consequences were critical: as Zolberg remarks, “within one generation the new wave turned the United States into the first nation to mirror humanity.”³⁵¹ In its trade policies, America also moved toward greater openness in this decade: following the adoption of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, the “Kennedy Round” of GATT (concluded by the Johnson administration in 1967) achieved significant reduction of tariffs.³⁵²

In the end, however, it was the Vietnam War that defined U.S. foreign policy for this era, triggering a backlash against the earlier universalist-activist consensus. Protestors against the war highlighted the hypocritical elements in Lyndon B. Johnson’s justification for military action, which led to a re-evaluation of U.S. commitments even among friends of the administration.³⁵³ As chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, J. William

³⁵⁰ On the backlash most visibly reflected initially in Barry Goldwater’s 1964 nomination, see: Seymour Martin Lipset, “Beyond the Backlash,” *Encounter* (Nov. 1964), pp. 11-24.

³⁵¹ Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, p. 337. See also pp. 324-336 on the history of the 1965 legislation.

³⁵² After the agreement was signed by 46 nations, *The New York Times* characterized the Kennedy Round as “the biggest round of trade liberalization in history,” although Eric Wyndham White, the director-general of GATT, already warned about a potential backlash of protectionism. Clyde H. Farnsworth, “46 Nations Sign Tariff-Cut Pact,” *The New York Times*, July 1, 1967, p. 1. However, subsequently, Congress repealed some of the tariff reductions agreed in the Kennedy Round.

³⁵³ Robert Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 222-226.

Fulbright helped to advance the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution; however, only two years later, he turned against the war when he argued that the United States was “at that historical point at which a great nation is in danger of losing its perspective on what exactly is within the realm of its power and what is beyond it.” In his treatise titled *The Arrogance of Power*, he outlined an argument reminiscent of the Niebuhrian warnings about U.S. complacency while also questioning that America could defy the laws of history:

The causes of the malady are not entirely clear but its recurrence is one of the uniformities of history: power tends to confuse itself with virtue and a great nation is peculiarly susceptible to the idea that its power is a sign of God’s favor, conferring upon it a special responsibility for other nations – to make them richer and happier and wiser, to remake them, that is, in its own shining image. Power confuses itself with virtue and tends also to take itself for omnipotence. Once imbued with the idea of a mission, a great nation easily assumes that it has the means as well as the duty to do God’s work.³⁵⁴

Rejecting the “missionary” impulse of American foreign policy, Fulbright re-embraced an *exemplary* tradition, emphasizing that the U.S. indeed had “a service to perform in the world” but it was “in large part the service of her own example.”³⁵⁵ Therefore, while he did not deny the universal relevance of American values, he moved closer to the withdrawal end of the spectrum – nevertheless, he did not advocate for a complete abandonment of international responsibilities.³⁵⁶ At the same time, some intellectuals went further: in a 1976 interview, George Kennan suggested not only that America should become less involved in international affairs, it had also “nothing much to say to the outside world,” thus he questioned even the exemplarist conception of American responsibility, and essentially favored particularism

³⁵⁴ J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pp. 3-4.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 21. For his critique of the “missionary instinct,” see: Ibid., pp. 11-19. See also: McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 34-35.

³⁵⁶ “I do not suggest that we should heap praise on the Chinese Communists, dismantle NATO, abandon Berlin, and seize every opportunity that comes along to appease our enemies,” he wrote. Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power*, p. 32. In addition, as representing Arkansas in the Senate, Fulbright defended the segregationist Southern racial order, so he filibustered the Civil Rights Act, which – similarly to Wilson’s case half-a-century earlier – taints his universalism. Nevertheless, while recognizing the mixed record of Fulbright’s political life, his foreign-policy views – including the initiation of what later became the Fulbright Program – can still be characterized as universalistic. For a critique of his argument, see: Henry Fairlie, “The Senator & World Power,” *Encounter* (May 1968), pp. 57-66. On Fulbright’s complicated legacy, see: Daniel Yergin, “Fulbright’s Last Frustration,” *The New York Times Magazine*, November 24, 1974, pp. 14-16, 76-94; Randall Bennett Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1995]), pp. 689-698.

combined with withdrawal.³⁵⁷ A more radical version of this thought was described as “reverse exceptionalism”: the idea – popularized during the Vietnam protests – that U.S. foreign policy was exceptional not because of its unique virtues but because of the harm it inflicted; or, as Ronald Steel argued, radicals and interventionists – despite their completely opposite evaluation of the merits of an American empire – shared a belief in exceptionalism by seeing the United States “either a salvation of the world or its destroyer.”³⁵⁸

Vietnam divided the Democratic Party into pro- and anti-war factions; while Vice President Hubert Humphrey, the 1968 presidential nominee (and a former ADA chair) represented the old Cold War consensus, he was challenged in the party by anti-war candidates Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern. In 1972, McGovern secured the nomination of a deeply divided party with an anti-war platform that planned to substantially cut back international commitments. The old liberal interventionist approach was kept alive by Senator Henry Jackson, but his foreign policy views were now only shared by a minority among Democrats; some of his advisers later joined the Republican Party, advancing views that soon came to be defined as neoconservative.³⁵⁹ Jackson – as a remnant of the universalist-activist Cold War agenda – fought against both his party’s perceived inclination to withdrawal and the particularism connected to Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger.

While Nixon and Kissinger did not finish the war (on the contrary, they escalated it for a time) or cut back American involvement significantly, their policy of détente and specific decisions like Nixon’s travel to China intended to free American foreign policy from its moralistic

³⁵⁷ George Urban, “From Containment to ... Self-Containment: A Conversation with George Kennan,” *Encounter* (September 1976), p. 20.

³⁵⁸ Ronald Steel, “The Power and Old Glory,” *The New York Review of Books*, May 31, 1973. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1973/05/31/the-power-and-old-glory/> “Reverse exceptionalism” was also mentioned in: Simon Serfaty, “No More Dissent,” *Foreign Policy* 11 (Summer 1973), p. 145.

³⁵⁹ Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, Elliott Abrams, and Douglas Feith all began their career in Jackson’s staff. See: Robert G. Kaufman, *Henry Jackson: A Life in Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

pretensions and align it more closely to their understanding of the national interest. In his later work *Diplomacy*, Kissinger claimed that “Nixon’s point of departure was American exceptionalism,” though he “preferred to operate on two tracks simultaneously: invoking Wilsonian rhetoric to explain his goals while appealing to national interest to sustain his tactics.”³⁶⁰ Nevertheless, foreign policy under Nixon and Ford can be characterized as a return to particularism and activism. While it is true that even Kissinger himself sometimes used rhetorical terms that reflected a universalistic American self-view,³⁶¹ “exceptionalism” was not a frequent point of reference and the “Nixon Doctrine,” as outlined in 1969, set more specific criteria for U.S. involvement in conflicts. Although the United States did not resign the responsibility of maintaining international order, under Nixon – and following the advice of Kissinger – the role of a *balancer* came to be openly acknowledged instead of one concentrating on upholding certain values.³⁶² However, Stanley Hoffmann believed that Kissinger’s conduct was problematic not only because “it relied on mechanisms ... that were inappropriate to twentieth century issues,” but also because he disregarded America’s domestic peculiarities, therefore his practice was closer to European *Realpolitik* than to the traditions of *American* realism despite the fact that “he paid lip service to the pursuit of America’s values.”³⁶³ Even though Hoffmann wanted to see an American foreign policy that transcended

³⁶⁰ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 706.

³⁶¹ In 1975, Henry Kissinger proclaimed that “America’s strength is unique and American leadership indispensable,” using terms associated with exceptionalism in foreign policy; the idea of the “indispensable nation” was later picked up by Zbigniew Brzezinski and was used more consistently by Madeleine Albright and Bill Clinton, as we will see later. Henry Kissinger, “A New National Partnership,” delivered before the Los Angeles World Affairs Council, January 24, 1975, published in: *Vital Speeches of the Day*, February 15, 1975, p. 258.

³⁶² Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, pp. 707-709. On the role of the balancer, see also: Holsti, “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy,” p. 271. Meanwhile, Henry Jackson, through the famous Jackson-Vanik amendment, wanted to force the administration to take values and domestic issues more into account in its Soviet policies, which contradicted the realism behind Kissinger’s conduct. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, p. 754. See also: Elliott Abrams, *Realism and Democracy: American Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 10-15.

³⁶³ Hoffmann, *Primacy or World Order*, pp. 92; 235-236. See also: Henry Kissinger, “Domestic structures and foreign policy,” *Daedalus* 95(2) (Spring 1966), pp. 503-529; Hans Morgenthau, “Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State,” *Encounter* (November 1974), pp. 57-60.

the exceptionalist framework, he did not believe that it was possible to get completely rid of the unique elements of the American worldview. Therefore, he warned Kissinger's successors to find solutions "both to cope with world order problems and to provide American democracy with the institutional, emotional, and intellectual foundations without which it cannot act effectively abroad."³⁶⁴

The claim that Kissinger's conduct did not appropriately reflect America's domestic traditions appeared in two different sorts of critique: on the one hand, he was criticized for not living up to the *universalism* of American values; on the other hand, he was seen as not *activist* enough to stand up against the Soviet threat. From the universalist side, Zbigniew Brzezinski – already as an adviser to then-candidate Jimmy Carter – denounced "the secretive style and the manipulative character of Kissinger's stewardship" leading to a conflict between the executive and legislative branches which, together with other factors, undermined the legitimacy of a system built on "a combination of optimism and universalism."³⁶⁵ Although Brzezinski recognized that global trends, in some ways, were moving away from the American model – especially with regards to a "new economic order" that Americans viewed at least ambivalently – he nevertheless repudiated a rising mood of "philosophical isolation," and believed that America "remain[ed] the globally creative and innovative society," "the world's social laboratory," or simply the "indispensable" country.³⁶⁶ Therefore, Brzezinski – together with a young Richard Holbrooke, then managing editor of *Foreign Policy* who also joined the Carter campaign – outlined a path toward a renewed universalist-activist consensus. However, both the structural conditions of the late 1970s and internal struggles within the incoming administration prevented Jimmy Carter from articulating a clear position. While Carter was

³⁶⁴ Hoffmann, *Primacy or World Order*, p. 96.

³⁶⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "America in a hostile world," *Foreign Policy* 23 (Summer 1976), pp. 85; 81.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 66; 90-92.

consistent in his universalist aims – with a reinforced emphasis on the issue of human rights – his foreign policy vacillated between activism and withdrawal, personified in the conflicts between Brzezinski and secretary of state Cyrus Vance.³⁶⁷ In the end, Carter committed himself to an activist policy, but this was only made clear following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan when he was already criticized by a rising Ronald Reagan and his neoconservative supporters.

Early neoconservatives criticized both Nixon's détente and Carter's human rights agenda for "being soft" on the Soviet Union. However, at least originally, this was a criticism from the point of view of particularism. Many intellectuals around the circles of *Commentary* and *The Public Interest* began to argue that although liberal democracy, as Americans understand it, would not become a global norm, this did not justify an abandonment of Cold War causes. Already in 1965, Irving Kristol wrote that "[t]he ideology of liberal democracy ... has lost its moving and shaking power," thus Americans could "no longer anticipate that this form of government will be the universal norm." Still, Kristol was not about to discard America's status as "policeman of world," even though he preferred a foreign policy more closely aligned with the national interest.³⁶⁸ Similarly, Daniel Patrick Moynihan stated that "liberal democracy in the American model" was no longer a role model, while Samuel Huntington also came to the conclusion that "democracy is only one way of constituting authority, and it is not necessarily a universally applicable one."³⁶⁹ In 1975, when Moynihan was appointed to become ambassador to the United Nations by Gerald Ford, he declared that the United States, being regularly outvoted, "goes into opposition" in the UN.³⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Moynihan believed that

³⁶⁷ For the Vance-Brzezinski conflict, see: Bernard Gwertzman, "Vance and Brzezinski: Feuding Chapter by Chapter," *The New York Times*, May 26, 1983.

³⁶⁸ Irving Kristol, "The 20th Century Began in 1945," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 2, 1965; Irving Kristol, "We Can't Resign as 'Policeman of World,'" *The New York Times Magazine*, May 12, 1968.

³⁶⁹ Daniel P. Moynihan, "The American Experiment," *The Public Interest* 41 (Fall 1975), p. 6; Samuel P. Huntington, "The democratic distemper," *The Public Interest* 41 (Fall 1975), p. 36.

³⁷⁰ Daniel P. Moynihan, "The United States in Opposition," *Commentary* (March 1975)

it was still necessary to defend American values in a hostile world, which was also the conclusion of Norman Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary*, who proclaimed the superiority of American values over Communism in a provocatively-titled article.³⁷¹ Whereas Podhoretz even invoked the terms of Wilsonian universalism, most neoconservatives were still coping with the contradiction between questioning the universal relevance of American values and proposing an active deployment of American power on the basis of those very values. Reconciling particularism with American action demanded setting priorities, and this was exactly the contribution in Jeane Kirkpatrick's widely-cited scathing critique of Jimmy Carter's foreign policy. In "Dictatorships and Double Standards," Kirkpatrick – while accusing the Carter administration of taking seriously human rights violations only in cases of American *allies*³⁷² – made a distinction between *traditional* and *revolutionary* autocracies, claiming that while the United States could coexist, or even cooperate with the former ones, there was no possible reconciliation with the latter. Consequently, she concluded that "no problem of American foreign policy [was] more urgent than that of formulating a morally and strategically acceptable, and politically realistic, program for dealing with nondemocratic governments who are threatened by Soviet-sponsored subversion."³⁷³

Kirkpatrick's essay earned her a job in the incoming Reagan administration. Still, her "solution" of freeing Cold War alliances from the pretensions of universalism was not accepted without reservations. For one, her claim that revolutionary autocracies (i.e. the Soviet Union and its satellites) posed far greater danger to American interests while right-wing American-friendly dictators were less repressive and more susceptible to change under U.S. influence was both factually and morally dubious. Disregarding the horrible human price paid in places like

³⁷¹ Norman Podhoretz, "Making the World Safe for Communism," *Commentary* (April 1976)

³⁷² This was, however, a questionable accusation, especially following Carter's response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, happening a month after Kirkpatrick's article was published.

³⁷³ Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," in: *The Essential Neoconservative Reader*, ed. Mark Gerson (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1996), pp. 163-189, quote is from p. 164. Originally published in: *Commentary* (November 1979).

Pinochet's Chile, ultimately, did not serve American interests well as the Cold War moved towards closure. Second, when she reiterated her particularism by stating that "an enormous body of evidence based on the experience of dozens of countries" contradicted the belief that democratization was possible "anytime, anywhere, under any circumstances," she could not expect that the 1980s would see a new wave of democratic advances.³⁷⁴ Ronald Reagan was also more comfortable using the language of universalism. Nonetheless, the "Kirkpatrick Doctrine" paved the way for more interventionism under Reagan, while also highlighting a strong revival of ideologically motivated foreign policy. However, the return of ideologies was not limited to the international realm; it was also present in domestic considerations of America's peculiar characteristics, affecting new elaborations of exceptionalist arguments.

The Return of Ideology: Upheaval and Uniqueness in the 1960s

The "consensus theory" of the fifties did not survive the upheavals of the next decade. Instead of the earlier emphasis on a single liberal consensus, the sixties and early seventies saw several new inquiries drawing a more complex picture about the ideologies and traditions that influenced American political development. This was partly due to the logic of ideational history itself. As Richard Hofstadter remarked in the conclusion of his study on *The Progressive Historians*, "[i]deas have an inner dialectic of their own."³⁷⁵ But external developments and structural changes played a role as well; the collapse of the Cold War consensus led to a similar breakdown of the (supposed) consensus on ideologies. However, this was not manifest in a return to the monocausal conflict-based explanations which characterized

³⁷⁴ "Vietnam presumably taught us that the United States could not serve as the world's policeman; it should also have taught us the dangers of trying to be the world's midwife to democracy when the birth is scheduled to take place under conditions of guerilla war," Kirkpatrick claimed. *Ibid.*, pp. 169; 173.

³⁷⁵ Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, p. 439.

the preceding Marxist and Progressive historiography. Instead, just as politics and foreign policy in the late 1960s, the realm of ideas also turned toward *complexity* and *ambiguity*, influenced by such distinct phenomena as the rising New Left and a re-awakening in religious consciousness.

This ideological resurgence was not what Daniel Bell foresaw in 1960 when he collected his essays of the previous decade under the title *The end of ideology* in order to demonstrate “the exhaustion of political ideas in the fifties.” While his emphasis on the “falsity of simplifications and the ideological pitfalls into which simplifications lead” was partly a repudiation of Marxism, it was also a more general statement on *any* abstract overarching theory that – according to him – failed to “capture the glancing ambiguities and complexities of American life.”³⁷⁶ The studies varied in scope and topic but they were connected through an approach that was critical of both Marxist theory and of the social science of the day, which prioritized the language of “hypotheses, parameters, variables, and paradigms” at the expense of taking *ideas* seriously.³⁷⁷ In this sense, “exception” lost its value as an analytical category: since Bell was skeptical of generalizability, there were no laws from which the United States could be exempted. Although in one of his essays, he analyzed Lerner’s *America as a Civilization* extensively, he did not use the same terms as Lerner: he was also interested in ascertaining certain differences between the U.S. and other countries, but he did not have a single “thesis about the uniqueness of the American experience.”³⁷⁸ Even when discussing the failure of socialism – something he already began in 1952 when he observed that “by 1950 American socialism as a political and social fact had become simply a notation in the archives of

³⁷⁶ Bell, *The End of Ideology*, p. 13.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-102; 13.

history,”³⁷⁹ – Bell did not focus on the supposedly unique conditions in America but rather on how the movement itself was not able to “relate itself to the specific problems of social action in the here-and-now, give-and-take political world.”³⁸⁰ In the end, he did not see this failure as an exceptionally American phenomenon: in a new 1967 preface to *Marxian Socialism*, Bell noted:

What was true about the American Socialist Party was equally true, I would argue, about the German Social Democratic Party or the French Socialist Party, but in a different context. Though also reformist or right-wing, they were equally Marxist; and though they were able to organize large sections of the working class in their countries, at crucial moments their ability to act, or adapt, was paralyzed because of ideological rigidity.³⁸¹

Therefore, while he recognized that Marxists in America, including the non-communist Socialist Party of America, were not able to understand American society due to “a set of ideological blinders,” it was not a reason to raise the issue of exceptionalism.³⁸² Although the fate of the social democratic parties in Europe differed from that of the SPA, this was not the object of Bell’s analysis. Interestingly, Seymour Martin Lipset, who later became a major proponent of exceptionalism within academia, was similarly cautious at the time: while he recognized some distinctive characteristics of the development of American labor movement in his book *The First New Nation*, he did not present those differences as being “of such a magnitude as to make American unionism a qualitatively different phenomenon from others.”³⁸³

³⁷⁹ Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967 [1952]), p. 193.

³⁸⁰ Bell, *The End of Ideology*, p. 278. (Chapter 12, “The failure of American Socialism: The Tension of Ethics and Politics” was originally published under the title “Socialism: The Dream and Reality,” *The Antioch Review* 12(1) (Spring 1952), pp. 3-17; it also appeared in a slightly modified version as the first chapter of *Marxian Socialism in the United States*.)

³⁸¹ Bell, *Marxian Socialism*, p. viii.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Nevertheless, Lipset noted that “the American labor movement has been less class conscious and more militant than those in European countries where there is less emphasis on individual achievement and equality.” Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2003 [1963]), pp. 172; 203.

Still, Lipset referred to Lerner's book as a major work that preceded his analysis and he also highlighted the "problem of what was once known in the Marxist literature as 'American exceptionalism'" as an important motivation for his research.³⁸⁴ While he did not use the term "exceptionalism" in the rest of his work (perhaps to signal his deviation from earlier Marxist approaches), his argument about the United States being the first "new nation" which revolted against its colonial past was grounded on the Hartzian foundations discussed in the previous chapter. In fact, by examining how differences in key values led to divergent paths in social development, he seemed to engage in exactly the sort of comparative analysis that Hartz missed in Lerner's project.³⁸⁵ However, the crisis starting from the mid-1960s also left its mark on Lipset's theory: in a new preface to the 1979 reissue of *The First New Nation*, he observed that political institutions became seriously discredited in the preceding decade and a half.³⁸⁶ Already in 1967, Hans Morgenthau also described an American scene with a "disarray of domestic and foreign policies, the violence from above and below, the decline of public institutions, the disengagement of the citizens from the purposes of the government, the decomposition of those ties of trust and loyalty that link citizen to citizen and the citizens to the government."³⁸⁷ Somewhat paradoxically, for him, this double crisis of America and the world both reinforced and questioned the validity of American uniqueness, highlighting that American society is peculiarly capable of adaptation but also distinctively vulnerable at the same time:

America is unique in that it owes its creation and continuing existence as a nation not to geographic proximity, ethnic identity, monarchical legitimacy, or a long historic tradition, but to an act of will repeated over and over again by successive waves of immigrants. It was not natural or historical necessity that created America or Americans, but a conscious choice. This voluntary element in the American

³⁸⁴ Ibid., p. xli.

³⁸⁵ See p. 132 and fn. 316 in Chapter 3. For Lipset's return to the issue of exceptionalism, see Chapter 6, pp. 217-218.

³⁸⁶ At the same time, based on polling data, he concluded that Americans only lost confidence in existing institutions and not in the values on which they were founded, thus he contended that his major observations remained valid. Lipset, *The First New Nation*, pp. v-xiii.

³⁸⁷ Hans Morgenthau, "What Ails America?" in: Morgenthau, *Truth and Power: Essays of a Decade, 1960-70* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1970), p. 29. Originally published in: *The New Republic*, October 28, 1967.

nationality accounts for a peculiar looseness in the social fabric of America, whose texture is subject to continuous change. In consequence, American society is singularly adaptive to changing circumstances. But it is also singularly vulnerable to disruption and disintegration.³⁸⁸

In a period hallmarked by political assassinations and racial discord, the danger of “disruption and disintegration” seemed to become as real as ever; the same vulnerability was reflected in Irving Kristol’s observation that America was experiencing “a crisis in values,” while Daniel Bell also analyzed the sources of American instability.³⁸⁹ However, Morgenthau’s emphasis on the uniqueness of the “conscious choice” in the creation of America, reminiscent of an Arendtian focus on the act of *beginning*, suggested that there *was* a peculiar tradition in American history which could help to overcome the crisis.³⁹⁰ Still, the rapidity with which events unfolded in the critical year of 1968 both in the United States and the world could be seen as another reason for the fading of exceptionalism.

The events of 1968 shook the world. Even more astonishing was the interconnectedness of protests happening at distinct places, even in societies under entirely different political systems. Certainly, there were unique elements in the American case: the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement and the intensity of racial tensions led to upheaval in a way that was not experienced in other countries. As the editor of *Encounter*, Melvin Lasky, wrote in a “Revolution Diary,” the Berkeley protests initially could have been conceived “in terms of ‘American exceptionalism;’” however, as protests started to pop up elsewhere, “theories had to be revised,” and “when the young Germans began to explode, theories began to go out of the window in utter intellectual defenestration.”³⁹¹ From Paris to West Berlin; from Prague to Mexico City and to the protests at Columbia University in New York (where Daniel Bell was teaching at

³⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 35-36. Cf. Morgenthau, *The purpose of American politics*.

³⁸⁹ Irving Kristol, “New left, new right,” *The Public Interest* 4 (Summer 1966), p. 6; Daniel Bell, “Unstable America,” *Encounter* (June 1970), pp. 11-26. Bell included an expanded version of the essay in his *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), pp. 177-219.

³⁹⁰ Cf. Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 212-213. See also: Tjalve, *Realist Strategies of Republican Peace*, pp. 109-122.

³⁹¹ Melvin J. Lasky, “May 1968: Berlin, Prague, Paris, London: Revolution Diary,” *Encounter* (August 1968), p. 83.

the time), the arising issues were seen as interrelated, notwithstanding the peculiar local reasons. The parallel events enhanced the consciousness of the international dimension of the problems of the sixties which diminished the appeal of any exceptionalist explanation, while – at the same time – highlighting the need to reconsider assumptions about the existing international order, including the logic of bipolarity. This did not mean that participants of the Prague Spring had the same viewpoint as someone from the Western “New Left”: this was clearly illustrated in Lasky’s report in which a student from Prague responded to the slogans of Berlin with “wonder[ing] what a young man who was not forced to mouth Marxist-Leninist phraseology was doing carrying around such mental baggage.”³⁹² Nonetheless, these movements influenced each other culturally and thematically, while together they also challenged the rigidity of the post-war order’s structures.

The rise of the “New Left” reanimated the debate on the fate of American socialism, however, this did not lead to a similar exceptionalist discourse as in the earlier case. It is not that there were no recurring elements. As was seen in previous chapters, American Marxists made attempts in the 1920s and 30s to connect the idea of socialism to the roots of the American tradition, and already under Lovestone’s leadership, when the issue of exceptionalism first arose, Communists wanted to present themselves as the true heirs of the American Revolution on its 150th anniversary. Half a century later, the New Left similarly used the bicentennial to convey a message that Revolution had been betrayed and “a new monarchy [had] grown up in America” in which “America’s giant corporations” had become “today’s royalists.”³⁹³ By forming a “People’s Bicentennial Commission,” leftists, as the conservative British

³⁹² Ibid., p. 88. Although *Encounter*, as a publication primarily created to legitimize the Cold War order, had an ideological interest in highlighting the disagreement between protestors of East and West, the quote from the Prague student is plausible considering the known “mental baggage” of Eastern European ideology. But see also: Bell, *Marxian Socialism...*, p. xi noting the lack of ideological interest on the part of the “New Left.”

³⁹³ Quoted in: Ferdinand Mount, “After the Bicentennial: The Last Hurrah?” *Encounter* (March 1977), p. 55.

commentator, Ferdinand Mount remarked, wanted to “find a socialist element in the American heritage, some vein that can be tapped and exploited to provide a distinctively American ideology of the Left which will not expatriate its adherents.”³⁹⁴ Around the same time, in a study of American labor history, John DeBrizzi claimed that “American exceptionalism” should be seen “as a contemporary ideology [that] is a powerful means toward obscuring the importance of the subjective intervention of the State in the objective social processes of the American political-economic system.”³⁹⁵ Criticizing exceptionalism as an ideology, DeBrizzi’s argument was reminiscent of earlier Communist denunciations of American exceptionalism as a “heresy,” which also served as reiterations of the universal law at the expense of particularism. However, exceptionalism was not invoked as regularly as earlier in relation to the lack of socialism, which could have resulted from two seemingly contradictory tendencies. First, the postwar failure of socialism as a movement coincided with the intellectual disillusionment with Marxist theory, and so the social sciences moved from general theories to more detailed empirical studies. As the works of Bell and Lipset exemplify, the focus on comparative studies did not necessarily mean a return to the language of laws and exception, and certainly this was the case for the old Sombartian question.³⁹⁶ Second, the re-emergence of a vocal New Left culminated in the worldwide protests of 1968 when apparently isolated local incidents suddenly gained international significance. The parallel nature of these movements around the world made it unlikely for a new generation of American socialists to look at their own country as the “exception,” while the aversion of the New Left to follow the ideological rigidity of past movements diminished the emphasis on law-like regularities. Bell might have

³⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

³⁹⁵ John DeBrizzi, “The concept of American exceptionalism as ideology,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 23 (1978-79), p. 93.

³⁹⁶ Still, this did not mean a complete scholarly abandonment of the Sombartian question. See, for instance: Katznelson, “Considerations on Social Democracy in the United States,” pp. 94-97.

been proven wrong about “the end of ideology,”³⁹⁷ but his focus on complexities and ambiguities was not refuted; on the contrary, these ideas came to the center at the time of the “Bicentennial Debate.”

Virtue and Corruption: “Coming of Age” at 200

As was seen above, Fulbright used the language of *virtue* and its confusion with power in his treatise while describing the threats posed by American overexpansion. With the crisis starting from the late sixties, old dichotomies of virtue and corruption, the public good and the private interest, missionary fervor and the jeremiad returned to the fore. These dichotomies also set the terms for the debates around America’s bicentennial, which paved the way for the return of the exceptionalist discourse. This section analyzes these contributions with a focus on how the reinvigoration of exceptionalism intended to resolve these dilemmas and redefine America’s role and purpose in the wake of structural transformations.

The cracks in the old liberal consensus were manifested in scholarly works that questioned the assumptions that American history was free of ideology and its unique tradition was isolated from external influences. One such source was related to the ongoing religious reawakening that went in parallel with the crisis of the 1960s. Authors like Ernest Tuveson, Conrad Cherry, Robert Bellah or Sacvan Bercovitch contributed to the rediscovery of how Protestant roots shaped a distinctively American vision of destiny and how America’s own rituals and practices

³⁹⁷ It is important to note, though, that Bell did not discard the power of *ideas* entirely in his book, he rather claimed that the “ideological age has ended” in the Western world as a “rough consensus among intellectuals on political issues; the acceptance of the Welfare State; the desirability of decentralized power; a system of mixed economy and of political pluralism” emerged. Still, this consensus had also evaporated by the late sixties. Bell, *The End of Ideology*, pp. 402-403; see also his later evaluations and responses to criticism for the 1988 (pp. 419-433) and the 2000 editions (pp. xi-xxviii).

played the role of a *civil religion*.³⁹⁸ At the same time, beginning with Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution*, several works challenged the interpretation that the American Revolution was born in an ideological vacuum: major studies of Gordon S. Wood and Bernard Bailyn recovered the continuities of an Atlantic republican political tradition, culminating in J. G. A. Pocock's opus *The Machiavellian moment*.³⁹⁹ These analyses had a complicated relationship with the thesis of exceptionalism: on the one hand, when Tuveson traced the religious motivations behind the idea of Manifest Destiny or Bellah revealed how certain practices reinforced the belief in America's chosenness, they in fact exposed how some of the ideas behind exceptionalism, including missionary tendencies, were continuously perpetuated. On the other hand, by situating the American case in a wider context and unearthing the diverse sources of supposedly exceptionalist arguments – the Puritan origins of the “American” mission or the influences of republican concepts travelling from Renaissance Italy through Britain to the New World – the myth of a birth in Enlightenment without context or history was unveiled.

The dialectic of virtue and corruption was at the heart of the republican tradition, which – as Pocock argued – appeared in the New World as “the quarrel with history in its distinctively American form.”⁴⁰⁰ The conflicting impulses of *private* and *public* had a peculiar relationship in America; as Bell argued, it was difficult to reconcile the idea of a “public interest” (what he also called “the art of collective solutions”) with the American traditions that were “so strongly

³⁹⁸ Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968); *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, ed. Conrad Cherry (revised and updated edition) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998 [1971]); Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96(1) (Winter 1967), pp. 1-21; Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1975]); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978)

³⁹⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*; Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993 [1969]); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992 [1968]); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). On the relationship between republicanism and liberalism, see also: Kalyvas and Katznelson, *Liberal Beginnings*, pp. 1-17, esp. fn. 1 for a more extensive list of works rediscovering republicanism.

⁴⁰⁰ Pocock, *Machiavellian moment*, p. 545.

individualist in temper, and so bourgeois in appetite.”⁴⁰¹ By no accident, *The Public Interest* was also the title of the journal that he founded together with Kristol in 1965: in the opening issue, even before the major crises of the late sixties, they clearly articulated the same dilemma of “a democratic society, with its particular encouragement to individual ambition, private appetite, and personal concerns has a greater need than any other to keep the idea of the public interest before it.”⁴⁰² For Kristol and Bell, the purpose of *The Public Interest* was to create a forum for debates on public policy freed from ideological presuppositions; ironically, in less than a decade, the contributors to this journal themselves came to be characterized as the harbingers of a neoconservative ideology. As the liberal consensus ran its course, *The Public Interest* became a flagship publication of essays criticizing liberal and leftist ideas in various policy areas from crime to taxation or unemployment.⁴⁰³

In its bicentennial issue titled “The American Commonwealth: 1976,” *The Public Interest* ran several articles that touched upon the issue of American uniqueness in one way or another. Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s introductory essay on the “American experiment” was followed by analyses of the crisis of American democracy and capitalism. For instance, Samuel Huntington examined the “democratic distemper” of the era as he argued that the weakening of political authority – which had never been strong in America in the first place – “pose[d] a problem for the governability of democracy in a way which is not the case elsewhere.”⁴⁰⁴ Kristol half-

⁴⁰¹ Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions*..., pp. 218-219.

⁴⁰² Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol, “What is the Public Interest?” (editorial), *The Public Interest* 1 (Fall 1965), pp. 3-5.

⁴⁰³ Bell himself remained skeptical of the neoconservative line and resigned from the editorship in 1973. Although he is often mentioned among neoconservatives, he liked to characterize himself as someone who was a “socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture.” In 1977, Kristol wrote about him that “[o]ver the years, his political views have changed less than those of the rest of us, with the result that, whereas his former classmates used to criticize him from the Left, they now criticize him from all points of the ideological compass.” Daniel Bell, “Modernism and Capitalism,” *Partisan Review* 45(2) (Spring 1978), p. 206; Irving Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 9-10, originally published as “Memoirs of a Trotskyist,” *The New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 23, 1977. On the neoconservative influence, see also Chapter 5.

⁴⁰⁴ Samuel Huntington, “The democratic distemper,” *The Public Interest* 41 (Fall 1975), p. 37.

heartedly defended corporate capitalism, “an institution which liberal democracy has never envisaged, whose birth and evidence have been exceedingly troublesome to it, and whose legitimacy it has always found dubious,” though one that he now regarded essential for the survival of the *private* character of business in the United States. Perhaps also with his broader intellectual transformation in mind, he concluded that “everything, including liberal democracy, is what it naturally evolves into – and our problem derives from a reluctance to revise yesteryear’s beliefs in the light of today’s realities.”⁴⁰⁵ Meanwhile, Lipset reiterated that Americans were “if not, ‘chosen,’ ... in many respects quite peculiar,” and the “paradoxical character of American politics” stemmed from the contradiction between utopian moralist impulsion and an outstanding ability to seek compromise.⁴⁰⁶

Yet it was Bell’s essay on the “end of American exceptionalism” which provoked the strongest reactions. Anthony Lewis, a columnist at *The New York Times*, also highlighted it as the article that made “this number of *The Public Interest* noteworthy” to him.⁴⁰⁷ Bell triggered a re-articulation of exceptionalism in a way that he perhaps did not expect; after all, his main thesis was the following:

Today, the belief in American exceptionalism has vanished with the end of empire, the weakening of power, the loss of faith in the nation’s future. There are clear signs that America is being displaced as the paramount country, or that there will be the breakup, in the next few decades, of any single-power hegemony in the world. Internal tensions have multiplied and there are deep structural crises, political and cultural, that may prove more intractable to solution than the domestic economic problems.⁴⁰⁸

This shows – underlined by his other writings, for instance in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* – that his main concern was related to structural and international causes. Nevertheless, “exceptionalism” for Bell, in line with his position in *The end of ideology* of rejecting a single “thesis of uniqueness,” was something more complex. He explained it as “the idea that, having been ‘born free,’ America would, in the trials of history, get off ‘scott free,’”

⁴⁰⁵ Irving Kristol, “On corporate capitalism in America,” *The Public Interest* 41 (Fall 1975), p. 141.

⁴⁰⁶ S. M. Lipset, “The paradox of American politics,” *The Public Interest* 41 (Fall 1975), p. 143.

⁴⁰⁷ Anthony Lewis, “The American Dream,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 1975, p. 29.

⁴⁰⁸ Bell, “The end of American exceptionalism,” p. 197.

but also that “it would escape the ideological vicissitudes and divisive passions of the European polity,” and “[a]s a liberal society providing individual opportunity, safeguarding liberties, and expanding the standard of living, it would escape the disaffection of the intelligentsia, the resentment of the poor, the frustrations of the young.” Moreover, the United States as a hegemon would “be different in the exercise of that power than previous world empires” simply because of its democratic nature.⁴⁰⁹ Therefore, his understanding of exceptionalism was not based on a single definition but – just as in Lerner’s case – was manifested in a number of internal and external characteristics, stemming from much-debated factors such as the “American creed,” land and frontier, egalitarianism and cultural diversity, security from external threats, economic abundance, and a unique two-party system. However, these were connected by a desire to *escape* history, and this is where Bell saw America’s ultimate failure just in the wake of Watergate and the Vietnam debacle: “There is no longer a Manifest Destiny or mission. We have not been immune to the corruption of power. We have not been the exception.”⁴¹⁰

Ironically, some reviewers of the article came to the opposite conclusion from the same experiences of corruption. Noting Bell’s more optimistic ending, Lewis reframed the upheaval of the previous years in an article published in a special “America at 200” issue of *The New York Times Magazine* as he emphasized that despite the shocks, the American constitutional system proved to be quite durable. “Not many countries could go through such years and emerge with institutions intact,” Lewis stated, adding that a “government of laws, not men, proved to be more than myth.”⁴¹¹ Similarly, in *Foreign Policy*’s own bicentennial series titled “The Third Century,” Richard Holbrooke shared Bell’s “thoughtful and sober yet hopeful

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., p. 205.

⁴¹¹ Anthony Lewis, “The System: We Have Really Seen the Future and It Works,” *The New York Times Magazine*, July 4, 1976.

conclusion” that America can remain “humanized among the nations” if it can retain the uniqueness of its constitutional system.⁴¹² Writing to *Encounter*, Mount went further as he declared that “[a]lmost all those factors which Bell claims have shaped American exceptionalism look like taking another generation or so to be extinguished,” and even then, he believed, the sense of uniqueness could survive.⁴¹³ Therefore, just in those years when U.S. power was understood to be significantly weakening and soon even the U.S. president would repeat warnings about a “crisis of confidence,”⁴¹⁴ influential voices within America’s most established newspaper and the foreign-policy world turned Bell’s concerns into an optimistic regeneration of American exceptionalism.

However, an appreciation of historical consciousness embedded in Bell’s arguments was almost immediately lost in these reviews. Bell’s last sentence about America remaining “humanized among the nations,” quoted by both Lewis and Holbrooke, was in fact a paraphrase of the ending of *The Progressive Historians*: Hofstadter warned his fellow historians against losing the recognition of complexity even if it was “inconsistent with the coarser rallying cries of politics.”⁴¹⁵ At the same time, in a peculiarly Niebuhrian fashion, Hofstadter – and hence Bell – concluded that “moral complexity of social action” could not be a justification for immobility, therefore – in Bell’s words – what “history does provide us [is] a double consciousness of the need for reflection and commitment.”⁴¹⁶ Consequently, the end of exceptionalism for Bell was inherently connected to this sensitivity toward the historical process: the structural developments happening by the mid-1970s – related to demographic

⁴¹² Richard Holbrooke, “A Sense of Drift, a Time for Calm,” *Foreign Policy* 23 (Summer 1976), p. 103.

⁴¹³ Mount, “The last hurrah,” p. 59.

⁴¹⁴ Jimmy Carter’s remarks were related to the energy crisis and became famous as the “malaise speech.” Jimmy Carter, *Crisis of Confidence speech*, July 15, 1979. <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/july-15-1979-crisis-confidence-speech>

⁴¹⁵ Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians*, p. 466. Quoted in: Bell, “The end of American exceptionalism,” p. 224.

⁴¹⁶ Bell, “The end of American exceptionalism,” p. 224.

changes, to the challenges of a post-industrial society and to the expansion of transportation and communication⁴¹⁷ – contributed to an apprehension of limits and finiteness. The result was the transformation of this once “exemplary once-born nation” through “the recognition of history.” Furthermore, “[t]he act of becoming twice-born, the entrance into maturity, is the recognition of mortality of countries within the time scales of history.”⁴¹⁸ Bell described exactly what Pocock called the “Machiavellian moment,” the moment “in which the republic was seen as confronting its own temporal finitude, as attempting to remain morally and politically stable in a stream of irrational events conceived as essentially destructive of all systems of secular stability.”⁴¹⁹ Pocock, of course, primarily described the tension between virtue and corruption in the eyes of eighteenth-century American colonists, but the similarities between these characterizations highlight the recurrences of the same experience in the American tradition; present at even the creation of the republic, then re-lived from time to time within discourses such as the “closing of the frontier” or the loss of American innocence.⁴²⁰

Reflecting on the terms of the bicentennial debate, the historian C. Vann Woodward situated Bell’s article in a long tradition of references to “America’s coming of age” or its “loss of innocence.” Woodward concluded that although “repeatedly proclaimed, the rites of puberty seem perennially deferred,” and instead, it was the perpetuated myth of America’s youthfulness that remained problematic.⁴²¹ Bell recognized the impossibility of escaping from history, while Pocock noticed that the American apocalypse “has been envisaged in the form of a movement

⁴¹⁷ See: Bell, “Unstable America,” pp. 19-23.

⁴¹⁸ Bell, “The end of American exceptionalism,” p. 223.

⁴¹⁹ Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment*, p. viii.

⁴²⁰ See also: “From Jefferson to Frederick Jackson Turner and beyond, it was a commonplace that sooner or later the frontier would be closed, the land filled, and the corruption of history – urbanisation, finance capital, “the cross of gold,” “the military-industrial complex” – would overtake America. Here are the origins of American historical pessimism.” Pocock, *Politics, language, and time*, p. 100. Another form of this argument is the “agrarian myth” mentioned briefly in Chapter 1 about the exclusionary side of progressivism. See also: Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, ch. 1.

⁴²¹ He also quoted Oscar Wilde: “The youth of America is their oldest tradition. It has been going on now for three hundred years.” C. Vann Woodward, “The Aging of America,” *The American Historical Review* 82(3) (Jun. 1977), p. 587.

out of history, followed by a regenerative return to it,” leading to the alternation between messianic expansion and its necessary failure due to corruptive forces ensuring that “the jeremiad note so recurrent in American history would be sounded again.”⁴²² Thus, the cyclical thesis mentioned at the beginning of this chapter still turns out to be valid to some extent, at least at the level of *ideas* (and not necessarily that of *actions*). Repeated calls for going back to a mythical past, just as promises to “make America great again” are nothing new; ending and reaffirmation of exceptionalism are bound to follow each other periodically as crises induce attempts to regenerate the American experience.

The question remains what to think about Bell’s appraisal of the end of exceptionalism. Can it just be discarded as one of those periodical alarms of decline which then turn out to be hugely exaggerated? His conclusion suggests another possible reading: just as Niebuhr claimed that democracy is about finding “proximate solutions to insoluble problems,” Bell’s contribution was his attempt to reconcile commitment with a continuous awareness of the historical and moral complexity of action. As we have seen, the exceptionalist discourse can be categorized along a particularism-universalism axis as well, not just between withdrawal and activism. That tension, Pocock noted, was as old as the Greek polis which “was at once universal, in the sense that it existed to realize for its citizen all the values which men were capable of realizing in this life, and particular, in the sense that it was finite and located in space and time.”⁴²³ For Bell, the recognition of complexity and ambiguity served to *deal with* – albeit not to solve – this problem. Even Kristol, who increasingly tended to simplify the American tradition with the *private* character of business, recognized that the strength of American democracy came from the ability “to convert ... ambiguities onto possible sources of institutional creativity and to

⁴²² Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment*, p. 543. For a recent contribution on exceptionalism along similar lines, see: Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*. Bacevich cites Niebuhr’s writings and even invokes Bell (though does not refer to him) with his subtitle *The End of American Exceptionalism*.

⁴²³ Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment*, p. 3.

avoid ‘solving’ them.”⁴²⁴ According to Arendt, this ambiguity was already present in Jefferson’s wording of the Declaration of Independence in which he blurred the distinction between “public” and “private happiness.”⁴²⁵ Therefore, “not solving problems” could contribute to the endurance of the American republic, while exceptionalism arose precisely from the ambiguity related to the tension between the universal and the particular. However, with the United States assuming the role of the *manager* of international order, new difficulties emerged from this ambiguity; therefore, the conclusion of the chapter examines the problematic relationship of crisis, exception and order in the late 1970s.

Conclusion: Crisis, Exception, and Order in the 1970s

Under the challenges to the post-war international structures that were discussed in this chapter, Richard Rosecrance claimed in a 1976 edited volume that America should become “an ordinary country” in international politics. Moreover, he added, “[s]he should not assume, nor should she ever have thought, that her efforts alone stood between anarchy and order in international relations.”⁴²⁶ Rosecrance, therefore, not only questioned that the United States had enough resources to maintain the order that it had built three decades earlier but he also cast doubt on the worthiness of the original project, rather advocating for policies which “strive to create and to help maintain a world in which adversaries still remain in contact with one another and where compromises are still possible.”⁴²⁷ In a similar vein, Stanley Hoffmann argued that “past habits” of U.S. foreign policy were inadequate for the necessities of the era: in a contribution

⁴²⁴ Kristol, “On corporate capitalism in America,” p. 139.

⁴²⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 127-128. See also: Kalyvas and Katznelson, *Liberal beginnings*, ch. 4.

⁴²⁶ Richard Rosecrance, “New Directions?” in: *America as an Ordinary Country: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Future*, ed. Richard Rosecrance (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 264.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., p. 266.

to *Foreign Policy*'s "The Third Century" series, he declared the "irrelevance of the two traditional ways [insulation and crusade] of coping with exceptionalism."⁴²⁸ For Hoffmann, exceptionalism meant "the deep and lasting faith in the singular, unique, 'unprecedented' and 'unrepeatable' character of the United States in its mission as a model democracy that is, at times, the lone and shining guardian of certain values and institutions, at times their missionary."⁴²⁹ Thus, he revived his cyclical theory on alternations between isolation and mission, though he rejected both end-points, and wanted to see America's escape from the exceptionalist cycle in order to create a stable order through a series of reforms in foreign policy institutions.⁴³⁰ Rosecrance and Hoffmann both believed that the complexities of the problems in the mid-1970s demanded a new set of solutions which could not build on the national style of "exceptionalism" (a word that Hoffmann took from Lerner and Bell⁴³¹) that characterized the Cold War order.

However, some of the reactions rather aimed to restore the conditions of American uniqueness, and, ironically, Hoffmann's continuous references to "exceptionalism" also contributed to the permeation of the concept into the foreign-policy discourse. Richard Holbrooke referred to Rosecrance's "odd and wholly inaccurate title" about America's ordinariness alongside other themes of "the new pessimists," and although he admitted that Americans had "fallen far short

⁴²⁸ Stanley Hoffmann, "No Choice, No Illusion," *Foreign Policy* 25 (Winter 1976-77), p. 129. A revised version of Hoffmann's article was included in his book where he simply called these two behaviors the two "traditional manifestations of exceptionalism." Hoffmann, *Primacy or World Order*, p. 224. However, Melvin Lasky, editor of *Encounter* equated exceptionalism only with the isolationist end of the spectrum as he wrote about "pendulum-like shifts from a sense of American exceptionalism to a larger feeling of kinship with Europe 'and the whole world.'" Melvin J. Lasky, "America and Europe: Transatlantic Images," *Encounter* (January 1962), p. 68.

⁴²⁹ Hoffmann, *Primacy or World Order*, p. 6. Hoffmann took the words "unprecedented" and "unrepeatable" from Bell's essay while Bell himself quotes Daniel Boorstin there. See note 3 on p. 31; Bell, "The end of American exceptionalism," p. 197.

⁴³⁰ Under "order," Hoffmann meant "the formal and informal rules that allow for the moderation of disputes and for a measure of security and stability." Hoffmann, *Primacy or World Order*, p. 5. For his suggestions for reform, see pp. 241-316. See also: Stanley Hoffmann, "A View from Home: The Perils of Incoherence," *Foreign Affairs* 57(3) (America and the World issue, 1978), pp. 468-469.

⁴³¹ While his main reference was Bell in *Primacy or World Order*, he cited Lerner in his previous book: Hoffmann, *Gulliver's Troubles*, pp. 95, 190-208.

of [their] dreams and values,” he maintained that those remained “worthy goals” while the U.S. could “survive anything but its own defeatism.”⁴³² Following Bell’s article, Holbrooke found noble elements of American exceptionalism whereas Brzezinski also warned against a “philosophical isolation without precedent in American history” as he reiterated that the United States could remain “indispensable” for world order.⁴³³ These arguments reflected an attempt to reinvigorate the universalism and activism of the Cold War consensus even though it did not mean a return to those *policies*: as national security adviser, Brzezinski acknowledged the changes in world order and argued that the “United States has a special role in helping to manage global change.”⁴³⁴ He outlined a “policy of constructive engagement”⁴³⁵ which – together with the Carter administration’s human rights agenda – attempted to rebalance America’s universalist commitments. However, internal disagreements were soon projected into external weakness while developments in Iran and Afghanistan undermined the transformation of American foreign policy.

Meanwhile, following Kirkpatrick’s argument, neoconservatives believed that instability could only be countered with a stronger American leadership based on the superiority of American values even if they were not recognized universally to be valid. In Kristol’s or Kirkpatrick’s view, this was necessary because of the exceptional menace of the Soviet threat – though this approach downplayed the complexity of the changing international scene as was described by Kissinger, Brzezinski and Hoffmann. Nevertheless, their reaffirmation of a version of exceptionalism served to bolster a response of resilience to the loss of confidence in the 1970s, and – as McCricken points out – it helped to redefine America’s global engagements in the

⁴³² Holbrooke, “A sense of Drift, a Time for Calm,” pp. 101; 112.

⁴³³ Brzezinski, “America in a hostile world,” p. 73.

⁴³⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “The Goals of U.S. Foreign Policy,” remarks delivered before the Foreign Policy Association in Washington D.C., on December 20, 1978 in: Brzezinski, *In Quest of National Security* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1988), p. 98.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

context of the “Vietnam Syndrome.”⁴³⁶ Although Ronald Reagan soon returned to the universalist language of a “city on a hill,” his neoconservative advisers were also influential when the Cold War once again reached a stage of bipolar rigidity. Thus, despite proclamations of the end of exceptionalism and fears that certain technological-societal changes could lead to a permanent crisis,⁴³⁷ the discourse – as predicted by Pocock’s cyclical understanding – soon moved to a rejuvenation phase, even though this did not make the peculiar concerns of the 1970s disappear. However, while Fulbright’s universalist and Kennan’s particularist criticism would have favored a significantly reduced American engagement amid new suggestions of focusing on interdependencies or on a “leadership without hegemony,”⁴³⁸ America’s global role was re-asserted emphatically.

Then, in the terms of the distinct layers of my discourse-tracing framework, the interrelated – political, military, economic – *structural* crises of the 1970s contributed to the breakdown of the universalist-activist Cold War consensus, leading to several alternatives along both of our axes on the *policy* level (see Figure 4). However, while particularism became influential both under Kissinger and with the rise of the neoconservatives, activism was never challenged effectively – even though the internal discords of the Carter administration led to confusion on the scopes of America’s global role. This tension between universalism and particularism influenced the *intellectual* discourse, which showed a rising appreciation of complexity and ambiguity in the American tradition, reinforced by the rediscovery of religious roots and republican thought at the *ideational* level. (While the rise of the New Left also led to reformulations of questions on exceptionalism in the terms of America’s lack of socialism, this – apart from some voices within academia – did not induce a re-intensified exceptionalist

⁴³⁶ McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 188-191.

⁴³⁷ See: Morgenthau, *The Purpose of American Politics*, pp. 197-292.

⁴³⁸ See: Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Independence and Interdependence,” *Foreign Policy* 22 (Spring 1976), pp. 130-161; Marina v. N. Whitman, “Leadership without hegemony: Our role in the world economy,” *Foreign Policy* 20 (Autumn 1975), pp. 138-160.

discourse.) However, the terms of the intellectual discourse also had repercussions on policy discourses as the concept of exceptionalism was now embraced by foreign policy elites. This transformation necessarily showed similar “simplification and politicization” as the ones that Ish-Shalom described in how the theory of democratic peace was turned into “public conventions and political convictions”: undoubtedly, just as Kennan’s original idea of containment was implemented in a crusading spirit that he could never endorse, the ambiguities of exceptionalism enshrined in the works of Niebuhr, Lerner, or Bell were lost as soon as the concept was inserted into a more directly *political* discourse.⁴³⁹ Nevertheless, it reflected the conflicting impulses of universalism and particularism, while the paradox of a country that continued to claim itself exceptional *and* universal did not disappear. In Chapter 5, we will see how exceptionalism was reasserted in the context of a renewed Cold War and an emerging neoliberal economic model which put American hegemony into a new conceptual framework, while Chapter 6 highlights its logical conclusion under the conditions of unipolarity.

⁴³⁹ Ish-Shalom, “Theory as a Hermeneutical Mechanism,” p. 583.

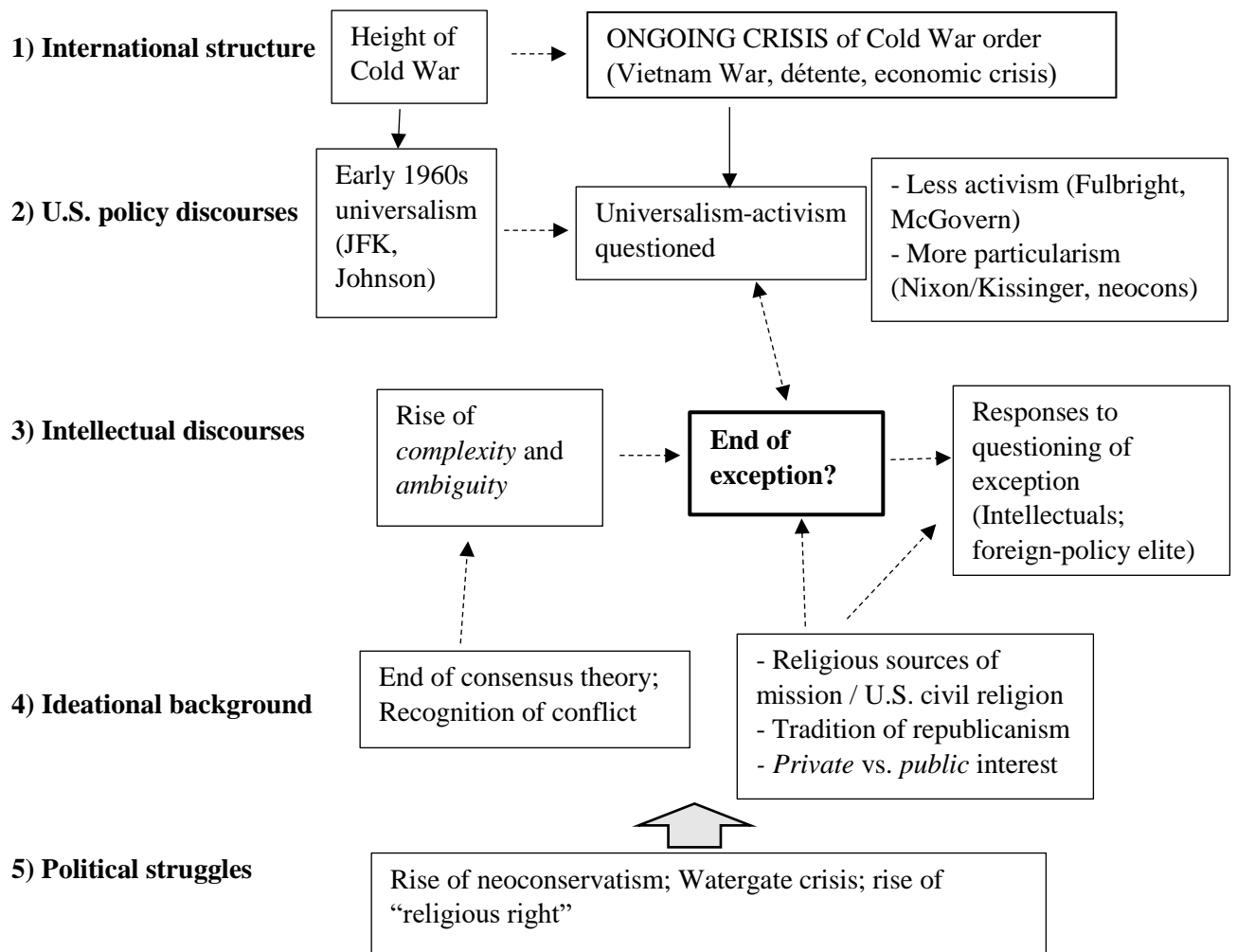


Figure 4. The discourse-tracing of American exceptionalism (1960-79).

Chapter 5 –

The Return of Confidence: Exceptionalism amid the Reconstitution of the Cold War (1980-91)

Just thirteen years after publishing his essay on the “end of American exceptionalism,” Daniel Bell reconsidered his ideas alongside other contributions to a conference organized at Nuffield College in Oxford dedicated exclusively to this concept.⁴⁴⁰ The existence of the 1988 conference itself demonstrates that exceptionalism did not die out; on the contrary, its resurgence – as was seen in the previous chapter – already began in the late 1970s while it received a new impetus during the years of Ronald Reagan’s presidency, paving the way for its further dissemination ever since. While the term still remained primarily part of a scholarly discourse in the 1980s, it was increasingly used in connection with American foreign policy, signaling a shift in its understanding which more fully unfolded in the post-Cold War era. How did this change occur? What was the meaning of exceptionalism for foreign policy as well as for American politics at this point of U.S. history? In line with our discussions so far, this chapter also traces the use of exceptionalist arguments through considering both agential innovations and changing structural conditions.

As the Soviet Union began the invasion of Afghanistan during the last days of 1979, the eighties started with a deterioration of superpower relations and a rapid return to the rigidity of bipolar structures following the striving for complexity in the previous decade. The shift in foreign

⁴⁴⁰ The contributions to the conference were collected in the edited volume *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism*, ed. Byron Shafer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). In his preface, Shafer notes that the idea for the topic came from his colleague, Laurence Whitehead “who suggested that American exceptionalism possessed all of the essential elements for a successful Anglo-American conference” as the topic “was intrinsically fascinating; it was large and provocative; it was inherently receptive to different approaches, from a range of disciplines.” Shafer, “Preface,” in: *Is America Different?*, p. ix. Bell’s essay – in a shorter version – was republished in *The Public Interest* (where his original article appeared as well) under the title “‘American exceptionalism’ revisited: The role of civil society,” *The Public Interest* 95 (Spring 1989), pp. 38-56.

policy already began under Jimmy Carter's final year while the subsequent election of Ronald Reagan ensured the renewal of ideological confrontation. In light of this crisis, America's role within the Cold War order was reinterpreted; at the same time, this reinterpretation was filtered through pre-existing exceptionalist discourses and beliefs about America's uniqueness. Meanwhile, Reagan's presidency also indicated a conservative resurgence in domestic politics: the upheavals of the previous decades were followed by a return to the *private sphere* while also reorienting attention to the gap between universal aims of an "American Creed" and their particularistic realizations, or as Samuel Huntington defined it in the early 1980s, the *gap* between *ideals* and *institutions*.⁴⁴¹ Then, a combination of domestic and international; economic, political and military tendencies together helped the agents of ideational transformation to turn the emphasis – somewhat paradoxically – toward both the *private* and the *national* interest, at the expense of the *public* one. In this way, the United States could be construed as unique because of its anti-statism and because of the role it played in a re-intensified Cold War. Therefore, this chapter argues that *a resurgent exceptionalism manifested a reassertion of national confidence and a reflection on the particularism-universalism dilemma at a time when the Cold War was reconstituted and the case for American uniqueness was rearticulated in the terms of a rising neoconservative/neoliberal worldview.*

Although Reagan's rhetoric was widely perceived as the manifestation of the return of national confidence, in fact, anxiety about America's superpower status still overshadowed the whole decade, appearing most visibly in the debate around the publication of Paul Kennedy's *The rise and fall of the great powers* in 1987.⁴⁴² Thus, the existence of an American "exception" to the

⁴⁴¹ Huntington, *American Politics*; Samuel P. Huntington, "American Ideals versus American Institutions," *Political Science Quarterly* 97(1) (Spring 1982), pp. 1-37.

⁴⁴² Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 and 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987). Indeed, even as the Iron Curtain was about to fall in 1989, Joseph Nye noted that "half the American public believed that the nation was in decline. Only one in five Americans believed that the United States was the top economic power, even though it remained by far the world's largest economy. After President Reagan's military build-up in the 1980s, only a fifth of the people believed that the

“rule” of the fall of great powers remained uncertain even as Huntington put the discourse into perspective with his remark that the United States had “reached the zenith of its fifth wave of declinism since the 1950s.”⁴⁴³ This is the context in which the exceptionalist discourse continued to evolve: even as the Cold War was about to wind down, it was debated whether the U.S. or the ideological struggle itself was the source of the exception.

From this, the chapter proceeds as follows. The first section highlights how a universalist and activist vision for international order was reasserted during the Reagan years even amid calls for the limitation of the domestic reach of the state – at least in rhetorical terms. Hence, exceptionalism could refer to both Americans’ supposedly unique aversions toward a strong central state and to the foreign policy doctrine which imposed an active defense of American values and interests abroad. The second section traces these notions in the intellectual discourses of the era: in light of the conservative tide of the 80s, scholars revisited theories about the underdevelopment of socialism in America; while they also reflected on the shift toward the *private* interest as they reconsidered cyclical alternations. This section highlights scholarly analyses of American uniqueness in the works of Bell, Huntington, and others. However, the turn toward a foreign policy understanding of exceptionalism also involved agents who helped transform the concept from one context to another. Therefore, the third section reconsiders the influence of neoconservatism, together with the paradoxes that they brought to the discussions of America’s foreign role. Their rise revealed the contradiction between the two sides of the exceptionalist discourse of the eighties: the distrust of the state and centralized power in the domestic context coincided with proposing a build-up of American power for the purpose of national security. This leads us to the concluding section which

United States was ahead of the Soviet Union in overall military strength. [...] A rash of books and articles published in the 1980s described the decline of nations, and American decline in particular.” Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 2.

⁴⁴³ Huntington is quoted in: Bell, “American exceptionalism revisited,” p. 40.

discusses the move from mere activism to “unipolarity”: Charles Krauthammer, in his famous essay published in 1990, argued that the U.S. needed to grab the opportunity of the “unipolar moment” to preserve its active global role amid the uncertainties and dangers of the new era.⁴⁴⁴ Krauthammer’s ideas definitely had a long-lasting legacy, arguably paving the way for the foreign-policy ideology of the George W. Bush administration. However, the goal of an unapologetic hegemony based on insurmountable American power was in odds with earlier arguments of particularism while its relationship to exceptionalism remained also complicated. Thus, in conclusion, I note the inner contradictions of a “universalist exceptionalism” that was a harbinger of the themes of the post-Cold War era.

Reagan’s “City upon a Hill”: A Return to Universalism and Activism

The resurgence of exceptionalist ideas has been overwhelmingly connected to Ronald Reagan’s presidential victory by both his contemporaries and later scholars of the concept. Indeed, just a few days after his inauguration address, the columnist Tom Wicker wrote in *The New York Times* that Reagan’s speech “was most effective when he played upon the hackneyed theme of the nation’s greatness – the traditional exceptionalism to which most Presidents have turned when they want a sure-fire response.”⁴⁴⁵ Similarly, Stanley Hoffmann pointed out that the “president’s fondness for American exceptionalism” was displayed in his address while in another article he characterized Reagan’s victory as “a revenge of exceptionalist faith.”⁴⁴⁶ More recent appraisals of Reagan’s presidency agree: looking back at the development of the idea

⁴⁴⁴ Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70(1) (America and the World issue, 1990/91), pp. 23-33.

⁴⁴⁵ Tom Wicker, “America The Greatest,” *The New York Times*, January 23, 1981, p. A23.

⁴⁴⁶ Stanley Hoffmann, “Foreign Policy: What’s to Be Done?” *The New York Review of Books*, April 30, 1981. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1981/04/30/foreign-policy-whats-to-be-done/>; Stanley Hoffmann, “Requiem,” *Foreign Policy* 42 (Spring 1981), p. 26.

primarily in the context of presidential rhetoric, Siobhán McEvoy-Levy remarks that “Ronald Reagan reinvigorated American exceptionalism in a way Carter had been unable,” while Trevor McCrisken observes that “Reagan was perhaps better suited than any other American president as a protagonist of the belief in American exceptionalism.”⁴⁴⁷ David Hughes concurs by noting that “[i]t is hard to overstate Reagan’s influence when it comes to thinking about US exceptionalism.”⁴⁴⁸

Certainly, Reagan’s use of exceptionalist tropes was more characteristic than any of his predecessors’ similar rhetoric. Although it was Jimmy Carter who spoke about America’s “unique self-definition which has given us an exceptional appeal” in his own inaugural address (hence, becoming the first – and until Barack Obama’s second term, the only – president who referred to the United States as “exceptional” during an inauguration ceremony) and despite never using the word “exceptionalism” itself, Reagan expressed his firm belief in American uniqueness in several ways.⁴⁴⁹ While he also alluded in other ways to the themes of national rejuvenation, his favorite – and certainly most famous – expression was a biblical quote, borrowed from John Winthrop’s 17th-century sermon, that referred to America as a “city upon a hill.” First used in modern politics by John F. Kennedy in a different context in 1961, Reagan popularized the term in a 1974 speech, and he reiterated it as candidate and as president several times. In Reagan’s words, it meant Americans’ “destiny to build a land that will be, for all mankind, a shining city on a hill;” undoubtedly a powerful message in the spirit of America’s universalist traditions.⁴⁵⁰ In addition, the invocation of this biblical term almost elevated

⁴⁴⁷ Siobhán McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy: Public Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 31; McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 86.

⁴⁴⁸ Hughes, “Unmaking an exception,” p. 545.

⁴⁴⁹ Jimmy Carter, *Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1977. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-0>. Still, Reagan also called America “unique”: Ronald Reagan, *First Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1981. *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-11>

⁴⁵⁰ Reagan at the 1980 Presidential Debate in Baltimore. Commission on Presidential Debates, The Anderson-Reagan Presidential Debate, September 21, 1980, <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate->

Americans to the role of the chosen people: in Reagan's rhetoric, the U.S. was "the beacon for freedom," also responsible for the freedom and well-being of others because it was "uniquely situated to lead the world into a new era of economic cooperation."⁴⁵¹ Thus, although Winthrop's original "city upon a hill" is often mentioned as the precursor of the *exemplarist* tradition of American foreign policy in the sense that "America would redeem the world not by intervention but by example," Reagan clearly used it as a statement of *mission*, meant to express both *universalist* and *activist* impulses.⁴⁵²

Table 8. Positions on America's foreign-policy role (1980-91).

	Universalism	Particularism
Activism	Reagan; new neocons; Holbrooke/McPherson	Early neoconservatives (Kirkpatrick, Kristol)
Withdrawal	exemplarism, "left isolationism" (Ted Kennedy)	"far left;" realism; nativism / "right isolationism"

Therefore, it is beyond doubt that Reagan represented the universalist-activist tradition in American foreign policy even though contestation did not disappear (see Table 8). Among

[transcripts/september-21-1980-debate-transcript/](#). On the myths surrounding the Winthrop sermon and Reagan's use of it, see: Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 1-3. See also: McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 89-94; Hughes, "Unmaking an exception," pp. 545-546; Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 30.

⁴⁵¹ Ronald Reagan, *Remarks at the White House Ceremony Opening the "Roads to Liberty" Exhibit* March 11, 1987; *Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Members of the City Club of Cleveland*, Ohio, January 11, 1988. *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252261>, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/253987>.

⁴⁵² Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History*, p. 89. For an argument that Winthrop's original expression was an exemplarist concept, see: Michael Signer, "A City on a Hill," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 1 (Summer 2006), <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/1/a-city-on-a-hill/>. But see also: Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), pp. 7-9. However, as was already mentioned, the strict dichotomy between the exemplary and the missionary tradition can be problematic, and it is true that even in Reagan's case, references to the "shining city on a hill" were sometimes fused with domestic qualities instead of a sense of mission.

Democrats, influential politicians like Ted Kennedy were pushing the party toward the withdrawal end of the spectrum, hence right-wing critics such as Charles Krauthammer derided their “new” or “left isolationism” (although isolationist sentiments have always been split through the parties). Krauthammer claimed that a paradox existed between the internationalist ends and the radically anti-interventionist means propagated by some Democrats.⁴⁵³ However, exemplarism is not necessarily isolationist and Krauthammer’s paradox disappears if other forms of influence are also considered besides military intervention. Nevertheless, potential problems arising from the gap between universalist aims and limited means were also recognized on the left: in a 1983 article titled “A foreign policy for the Democrats,” Richard Holbrooke and Harry McPherson – a former advisor to Lyndon Johnson – recommended a centrist path that rejected both the Reagan administration’s Cold War ideology and the “far left” understanding of the United States as a “pariah,” “an insensate brute whose aggressive instincts must be controlled for the sake of world peace.” Instead, they proposed a reformed version of the old liberal consensus with recognizing that the United States

is an imperfect but free democracy. Its military power, though no longer virtually omnipotent, is the most important bulwark of freedom for the nontotalitarian world. If it erred in Vietnam, that error does not make legitimate efforts to resist aggression any less essential. As the strongest free nation, the United States must shoulder the main burden of leadership for the non-Communist world.

Furthermore, Holbrooke and McPherson endorsed a “foreign policy based on enduring national interests and values and rooted in the realities of international life,” however, one that did not betray the “uniqueness of what the sociologist Daniel Bell has called ‘American exceptionalism.’”⁴⁵⁴ Therefore, their position can also be seen as a reiteration of universalism (in recognizing, for example, the relevance of human rights for American policy) and activism.

⁴⁵³ Charles Krauthammer, “Isolationism, Left and Right,” *The New Republic*, March 4, 1985, p. 19. See also: Irving Kristol, “A New Isolationism?” *Encounter* (June 1966), pp. 49-53; Charles Krauthammer, “The Poverty of Realism,” *The New Republic*, February 17, 1986, p. 15.

⁴⁵⁴ Harry McPherson and Richard Holbrooke, “A Foreign Policy for the Democrats,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 10, 1983, pp. 30, 38, 42. <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/10/magazine/a-foreign-policy-for-the-democrats.html>

Republicans also had divisions among themselves though. Krauthammer even found representatives of a “right isolationism” in the Reagan administration. However, these views – for example, some statements of Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger about the restraint in use of force – can rather be characterized as particularism than withdrawal. Indeed, as was seen in Chapter 4, early neoconservatives like Irving Kristol and Jeane Kirkpatrick were leaning toward particularist views instead of a belief in the universal relevance of the American understanding of democracy. Those who belonged to the group did not have a common position on every issue (Kristol in fact even played with the idea of an American withdrawal from Europe) but they agreed on the importance of the military, political, and ideological threat posed by the Soviet Union, and thus they wanted to counter it with a strong articulation of American values and interest. Undoubtedly, a belief in the superiority of American values underlined this position from which a conviction also followed that even if these values were not universally valid, their application would ultimately contribute to the general good. Therefore, Norman Podhoretz favored the term “neonationalism” instead of “neoconservatism” to describe “their highly positive views of the values implicit in the constitutional and institutional structure of American civilization and their belief that the survival of liberty and democracy requires a forceful American presence in the world.”⁴⁵⁵ From this group, Kirkpatrick became ambassador to the UN under Reagan but her skepticism toward democracy promotion led to internal discord and, ultimately, her gradual loss of influence within the administration.⁴⁵⁶

Apart from his rhetoric, in what sense was Reagan’s universalism manifest? First, related to issues on trade and immigration, the policies of the administration were arguably closer to the

⁴⁵⁵ Norman Podhoretz, *The Present Danger* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), p. 88.

⁴⁵⁶ Smith, *America’s Mission*, pp. 289-291; Abrams, *Realism and Democracy*, pp. 33-34; 54. For Kirkpatrick’s views, see: George Urban, “American Foreign Policy in a Cold Climate,” *Encounter* (November 1983), pp. 9-33.

universalist worldview. As the embrace of the free market and neoliberal ideas formed the backbone of Reagan's economic policies, it is not surprising that he enthusiastically supported free trade. While some evaluations of his presidency noted the gap between his rhetoric and actual trade policies, he nevertheless signed a free trade agreement with Canada, and initiated the same with Mexico, thus paving the way to NAFTA. Moreover, the Uruguay Round of GATT began under his presidency, which ultimately led to the creation of the World Trade Organization, propelling a substantial increase in global trade.⁴⁵⁷ Regarding immigration, the administration was more divided. On the one hand, Reagan's free-market ideas and the general inclination to limit the reach of the state (though not in its external context) suggested a less restrictionist approach: his economist advisers argued that "immigration was of net economic benefit to the United States" and, being a former governor of California, the president himself agreed that foreign labor was necessary to some extent.⁴⁵⁸ On the other hand, the conservative resurgence behind Reagan's victory revived some of the more exclusionary opinions, especially in the wake of a significant increase in immigrant inflow following the more liberal 1965 law. Thus, similarly to the discourses that preceded the restrictions of the 1920s, some within the administration securitized immigration and presented it as a "law-and-order" issue. Still, in 1986, Reagan signed the compromise Immigration Reform and Control Act which legalized around 3 million immigrants (mostly of Mexican origin) in exchange for strengthening border controls and requiring businesses to check the immigration status of employees.⁴⁵⁹ Although, in this sense, the legislation balanced particularist and universalist assumptions – and even Reagan's own diary entry emphasized that he signed the law because

⁴⁵⁷ Regarding the gap between rhetoric and policies, see: William E. Pemberton, *Exit with Honor: The Life and Presidency of Ronald Reagan* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), pp. 210-211. Pemberton quotes Reagan: "But the plain truth was that all of us were protectionist to some extent," noting the pressure he received from the automobile industry. On the increase of world trade, see: Smith, *America's Mission*, p. 292.

⁴⁵⁸ Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, p. 355.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 356, 364-370; Robert Pear, "President Signs Landmark Bill on Immigration," *The New York Times*, November 7, 1986, p. A12.

it was “high time we regained control of our borders,”⁴⁶⁰ – the outcome certainly reinforced the universalist self-view: Reagan himself also heralded the fact that the amnesty enabled undocumented immigrants to “become Americans,” while immigration scholar Lawrence Fuchs praised Alan Simpson, a key senator in the process, for advancing “the unifying political principles of equal rights based on the founding myth of the Republic, which gives the nation its sense of national purpose and identity.”⁴⁶¹ In addition, in 1990, George H. W. Bush signed an even more liberal immigration act (reforming the 1965 law) as his administration wanted to prevent an “identification with those whom the press calls the immigration ‘restrictionists’ or ‘exclusionists.’”⁴⁶² The legislations of the 1980s, therefore, contributed to the emergence of an even more diverse and universal American nation though this also carried the seeds of a restrictionist backlash, similar to the early 1920s, arising by the end of the century.

Second, Reagan was, of course, also famous for his support of “freedom fighters” around the world as an instrument to counter Soviet proxies. Initially, though, this policy could have been conceived in the terms of Kirkpatrick’s above-mentioned distinction between “traditional” and “revolutionary” autocracies, which allowed Americans to bolster friendly (i.e. right-wing) dictatorships – hardly an indication of universalism in itself. The “Kirkpatrick Doctrine” paved the way for the “Reagan Doctrine” of overt and covert policies in support of anti-communist resistance movements, an escalation of the ideological confrontation of the Cold War, but a policy that was still based on a certain logic of particularism considering the selective nature of the battlefronts.⁴⁶³ However, around 1982, a change occurred both in rhetoric and in

⁴⁶⁰ H. W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015), p. 545.

⁴⁶¹ Brands, *Reagan*, p. 545; Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, p. 370. Others, of course, debated this conclusion, fearing that the new law would “exacerbate the racist, xenophobic sentiments that are increasingly common in border areas and other regions with large Mexican communities” as it would raise unfulfillable expectations. Brands, *Reagan*, p. 546. For other evaluations, see: Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, p. 375.

⁴⁶² Labor Secretary Elizabeth Dole is quoted in: Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, p. 378. See also: Robert Pear, “Major Immigration Bill Is Sent to Bush,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 1990, p. B10.

⁴⁶³ The term “Reagan Doctrine” was first coined by Charles Krauthammer with this understanding: Charles Krauthammer, “The Reagan Doctrine,” *Time*, April 1, 1985, p. 54.

personnel, which soon reverberated into policy as well. George Shultz replaced Alexander Haig, a veteran of the Nixon administration, as secretary of state, while Elliott Abrams, a representative of a new generation of neoconservatism, became assistant secretary for human rights who favored a greater emphasis on the promotion of democracy.⁴⁶⁴ In a memorandum written in late 1981, Abrams argued that the U.S. would “never maintain wide support for our foreign policy unless we can relate it to American ideals and to the defense of freedom.” While not rejecting the assumption that the benefits of good bilateral relations could outweigh human rights concerns, he concluded that “it is a major error to subordinate these concerns in each case – because *taken together* these decisions will destroy us.” Turning Kirkpatrick’s argument on its head, Abrams added that “[i]f we act as if offenses against freedom don’t matter in countries friendly to us, no one will take seriously our words about Communist violations, and few abroad will take seriously our argument that our society (and our military effort) are dedicated to preserving freedom.”⁴⁶⁵ Abrams’s memo earned him his job, while soon Reagan himself also embraced the views outlined in the document. In a June 1982 speech addressing the British Parliament, he committed the U.S. to “assisting democratic development,” and in 1983, Congress created the National Endowment for Democracy to promote such policies.⁴⁶⁶ To be sure, external circumstances were also changing: the new wave of democratic advances first transformed Latin America, soon reached Southeast Asia and – as the Solidarity movement in Poland showed – even began to show cracks in the Soviet dominance over Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, notwithstanding Smith’s observation that the U.S. strategy “called for minimal effort on its part to realize its vision of a world order dominated by democratic governments” and despite the fact that questionable practices were maintained in relations with unworthy

⁴⁶⁴ Smith, *America’s Mission*, pp. 286-287; Abrams, *Realism and Democracy*, pp. 37-40.

⁴⁶⁵ Abrams publishes the whole memo in: *Realism and Democracy*, pp. 40-43. (Emphasis in original.)

⁴⁶⁶ Abrams, *Realism and Democracy*, pp. 47-48; Smith, *America’s Mission*, pp. 286-287; Ronald Reagan, *Address to Members of the British Parliament*, June 8, 1982.
<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/60882a>

allies (not the least, in Abrams's own conduct in hemispheric relations as exemplified in his involvement in the "Iran-Contra" scandal), Reagan's "global democratic revolution" of the 1980s can undeniably be seen as a universalist and activist policy turn.⁴⁶⁷

As Smith also notes, for Reagan, the propagation of democracy was deeply intertwined with the endorsement of free-market reforms; in fact, this also accounted for the restraint in his conduct as he believed that "history was on the side of the democratic, free-market forces."⁴⁶⁸ Of course, his belief in the superiority of market forces also influenced his domestic policies: his promotion of "supply-side economics" (tax cuts, deregulation and a decrease of non-defense spending) aimed to curtail the reach of the state domestically at a time when the national security apparatus was further reinforced. According to his critics, both the domestic and the international sides of these policies reflected an ideological rigidity, which was increasingly characterized as a belief in America's exceptional qualities. Furthermore, the foreign policy part of this ideology was often associated with the role of Reagan's neoconservative advisers. Therefore, the next section identifies those sources of exceptionalism that were mentioned in the discourses of the 1980s, whereas, after that, we turn to the role of neoconservatives as agents of ideational transformation.

The Turn toward the "Private" and the "National": Intellectual Discourses of the 1980s

The previous chapters have noted that discourses of American exceptionalism were often located at the boundary between academic discussion and political action: while intellectuals formulated their argument in a scholarly manner with an analytical focus, they also aimed to

⁴⁶⁷ Smith, *America's Mission*, p. 274.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 292.

influence political action by justifying certain policies or excluding and stigmatizing some other options and their proponents. During the 1980s, these two functions began to separate: while scholars continued to examine whether some *objective* sources were indeed responsible for America's unique development, others concentrated on the *subjective* political construction of exceptionalism which later made its way to the language of politicians themselves. In Ish-Shalom's terminology, *theoretical constructs* were turned into *public conventions*, which he defined as "general background knowledge about the world that is taken for granted, and shapes the commonsensical codes and behavior."⁴⁶⁹ What were the possible sources for this background knowledge in this period? In line with the political and policy discourses highlighted previously, the 1980s proved to reverse the upheavals of the previous decades as the creedal passion of the "S&S years" (the period from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s in Huntington's term) were replaced with an emphasis on the *private* and – somewhat contradictorily – the *national* interests, bringing to the fore some supposedly unique American beliefs and characteristics in these regards. Thus, exceptionalism was analyzed in the context of the *absence of socialism*; of the *absence of the state*; of a possibly unique *divergence between universalist ideas and their particular realizations*; and of the *ideology that now seemingly defined foreign policy*.

THE ABSENCE OF SOCIALISM

The Sombartian question was the original motivation behind the concept of exceptionalism. As the United States turned toward conservatism following Reagan's victory, the debate about the reasons for the absence – or weakness – of American socialism again captivated the attention of scholars. In his 1982 presidential address to the American Political Science Association, Seymour Martin Lipset returned to the problem of "American exceptionalism," and analyzed the history of working-class movements comparatively. After a thorough review of different

⁴⁶⁹ Ish-Shalom, "Theory as a Hermeneutical Mechanism," p. 571.

Western cases, Lipset essentially revived the Hartzian thesis. “In the United States, and to a lesser extent in Canada, the absence of an aristocratic or feudal past, combined with a history of political democracy prior to industrialization, served to reduce the salience of class-conscious politics and proposals for major structural change,” he concluded, summarizing it in the quote of “[n]o feudalism, no socialism,” taken from Walter Dean Burnham’s paraphrase of the famous Barrington Moore thesis.⁴⁷⁰

However, the exceptionalist assumption was increasingly challenged in this respect. Bell, who began his analysis with a review of the possible social laws from which the United States might be exempted, first dealt with Marxism as an obvious candidate. Nonetheless, after examining Sombart’s argument from eight decades earlier, he found that “there is no exception, perhaps, because there is no rule.”⁴⁷¹ Eric Foner reached similar conclusions as he argued that – despite the legitimate interest in some particularities of American development – the formulation of the question of “why was there no socialism in the United States” itself “rests upon an interpretation of history that accords socialism a privileged position among radical movements because it arises inexorably out of the inner logic of capitalist development, and holds out the promise of a far-reaching social revolution.” Although Foner accepted the Marxist logic behind this assumption, he claimed that the empirics did not support the exceptionalist presupposition. By the 1980s, Western European socialist parties were not socialist in the Marxist sense, thus the exceptionality of the American case disappears – as Foner remarked, “[t]oo often in American writing, ‘Europe’ is posited as an unchanging class-conscious monolith in contrast to the liberal, bourgeois United States.”⁴⁷² In the end, Foner’s conclusion was similar to how

⁴⁷⁰ Lipset, “Radicalism or Reformism,” p. 14. “No bourgeois, no democracy” is, of course, the original thesis of Barrington Moore. Note also how Lipset subtly changed his conclusions compared to his earlier works noted in Chapter 4. See also: Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development*, pp. 41-43.

⁴⁷¹ Bell, “American exceptionalism revisited,” p. 44.

⁴⁷² Foner, “Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?” p. 74.

Plekhanov rejected exceptionalism a century earlier: while Plekhanov had then blamed “exceptionalists” for contrasting Russia with an “abroad” conceived as a “completely homogeneous whole,” now it was the U.S. versus an imagined understanding of “Europe.”⁴⁷³ Sean Wilentz concurred: in his analysis of labor history before 1920, he observed that there *was* a “history of class consciousness in the United States comparable to that of working-class movements in Britain and on the Continent” while exceptionalist arguments often essentialized the “supposed ‘socialist’ standards of other countries.”⁴⁷⁴ While scholars continued to examine in what sense the development or absence of American socialism was unique, this was no longer a major factor in the exceptionalist discourse. At the same time, the argument was extended to consider America’s supposedly unique anti-statist traditions.

THE ABSENCE OF THE STATE

From the New Deal era to the 1970s, Americans experienced an unprecedented expansion of the (federal) state, leading to fears as early as the 1930s that the United States would lose its peculiar anti-statism. Some even saw it as a threat of “creeping socialism” – a term coined by Friedrich Hayek – which proved to be unsubstantiated, though convergence theories of political economy were more convincing in the three decades following the end of World War II. However, convergence ran its course by the 1980s: Ronald Reagan’s presidency revived exceptionalist arguments emphasizing the lower level of public expenditures or the smaller size of the federal government. Notwithstanding that the neoliberal turn was not limited to the United States (but, for instance, made an impact on Margaret Thatcher’s policies as well), individualism – in Lipset’s words – was seen as a “particularly American phenomenon.”⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷³ See Chapter 1, p. 49.

⁴⁷⁴ Wilentz, “Against Exceptionalism,” pp. 17-18. See also: Aristide R. Zolberg, “How many exceptionalisms?” in: *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, eds. Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 397-455.

⁴⁷⁵ Seymour Martin Lipset, “Exceptional Individualism,” review of “Middle American Individualism: The Future of Liberal Democracy” by Herbert J. Gans, *Contemporary Sociology* 18(6) (Nov. 1989), pp. 905-907.

However, Richard Rose found that “political economies of advanced industrial societies have been diverging,” thus exceptionalism was not justified as there was no rule from which the United States could deviate.⁴⁷⁶ Tellingly, both Lipset and Rose now originated the term of “exceptionalism” from Tocqueville; therefore, just in parallel with a move from the public to the private interest in the organization of economic life, the Marxist origin of the terminology itself waned and instead was replaced with a rediscovery of the Tocquevillian heritage.⁴⁷⁷

For Bell too, exceptionalism was related to the *absence of the state* and its substitution with *government* in the American constitutional order. According to him, the U.S. was the only “complete civil society” in the Hegelian understanding of the term with its “emphasis on individual self-interest and the utilitarian mode of thought.”⁴⁷⁸ While noting the emergence of the state through the New Deal, the Second World War, and the post-war expansion, Bell argued that the exceptional character of the United States was revived by a “demand for a return to ‘civil society,’ the demand for a return to manageable scale of social life.” This was certainly not a return of classical civic humanism and republican virtue (which would prioritize the public good over private welfare), instead, he envisioned a “modern civil society,” one which was based on “the principle of toleration and the need for plural communities to agree on rules governing procedure within the frame of constitutionalism.”⁴⁷⁹ Therefore, Bell’s understanding reflected an appreciation of both pluralism and universal values within the American tradition. At the same time, Huntington pointed out the gap between those values and their particular realizations.

⁴⁷⁶ Richard Rose, “How Exceptional is the American Political Economy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 104(1) (Spring 1989), p. 92.

⁴⁷⁷ Tocqueville certainly did not come up with the term “American exceptionalism,” but he used the adjective “exceptional” with a limited meaning for a particular issue in *Democracy in America*. Daniel Rodgers writes that Tocqueville’s “entire interest in the United States drew on his sense of the interconnectedness of the democratic impulse on both sides of the Atlantic, [and he] saw in Jackson’s America not the exception but the rule, the face of France’s future” as he criticizes Lipset for “rewriting” Tocqueville “through selective quotations.” Rodgers, “Exceptionalism,” p. 37, n. 17. See also p. 10, fn. 27 on Tocqueville.

⁴⁷⁸ Bell, “American exceptionalism revisited,” p. 48.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

THE “IvI GAP” AND HUNTINGTON’S “AMERICAN CREED”

In his book *American Politics*, Huntington reviewed previous paradigms of American development as he argued for a return to the realm of ideas as explanations of the potentially unique U.S. historical development instead of only focusing on structural factors. Huntington focused on the “American Creed,” “a complex and amorphous amalgam of goals and values” revolving around the notions of “liberty, equality, individualism, democracy, and the rule of law under a constitution.” These ideas partly contradict and partly reinforce each other, yet they do not form a proper ideology as they cannot be narrowed down to a set of clearly delineated political values and beliefs distinguishable from other ideologies.⁴⁸⁰ His main argument was that there was a perpetual discrepancy between these ideals and their institutional realizations, something that he called the “IvI gap” (meaning *ideals* vs. *institutions*), which propelled regular attempts to reconcile or eliminate this gap in different ways at distinct moments of American history. From time to time, this tension leads to a surge of moralistic creedal passions, which – perhaps necessarily – turns into disappointment, and the “S&S years” were just the latest recurrence of this cycle.⁴⁸¹ In this view, the “promise of disappointment” is coded into the American experience. In fact, Huntington believed that this was what made the U.S. exceptional in the first place. Therefore, according to him, what Bell had called the “end of American exceptionalism,” in fact, “affected only the incidental elements of American

⁴⁸⁰ Huntington, *American Politics*, pp. 14-15. Note that Huntington’s outlook significantly changes by the early 2000s as he begins to emphasize – in line with his major argument about the clash of civilizations – that the *political* values of the “American Creed” are secondary to the *cultural* – and especially *religious* – factors in American identity. See: Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

⁴⁸¹ In fact, Huntington identifies four types of responses depending on the intensity of belief in the American ideals (high/low) and the perception of the gap between ideals and institutions (clear/unclear). Moralism is the response when the perception is clear and the intensity is high. When perception is less clear but intensity remains high, the common response is to deny the gap, which is identified as hypocrisy by Huntington. In low-intensity times, the response can be either cynicism (the toleration of the gap) or complacency (ignoring the gap) depending on the perception. Huntington finds four periods of moralistic reform in American history: the Revolutionary period, the Jacksonian and Progressive eras, and finally the 1960s and early 1970s. *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 85.

exceptionalism, those of power, wealth, and security.” However, the IvI gap only intensified, still maintaining America’s uniqueness:

The United States has no meaning, no identity, no political culture or even history apart from its ideals of liberty and democracy and the continuing efforts of Americans to realize those ideals. Every society has its own distinctive form of tension that characterizes its existence as a society. The tension between liberal ideal and institutional reality is America’s distinguishing cleavage. It defines both the agony and the promise of American politics. If that tension disappears, the United States of America, as we have known it, will no longer exist.⁴⁸²

Huntington’s later works stressed more the peculiar Anglo-Saxon version of Protestantism that supposedly determined the character of American culture. However, in the early 1980s, he clearly connected American identity to this tension between universal aims and particular institutional solutions, another formulation of the same tension from which the problem of the “Machiavellian moment” arose, according to Pocock. In Pocock’s understanding, a “movement out of history” is followed by a “regenerative return to it,” while Huntington also contended that this tension led to periodical shifts as public sentiment changed in reaction to disappointment. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Albert Hirschman also observed similar cyclical alternations between *public* and *private interest* periods as overcommitment regularly gave rise to frustration due to general characteristics of human nature or consumption patterns.⁴⁸³

But in what sense could they perceive these shifts exceptional then? Responses went back to those very ideals that Huntington described as the American Creed, though there were important disagreements. For Schlesinger, the original understanding of American politics was an uncertain experiment based on the Calvinist notion of “providential history” that “supposed that all secular communities were finite and problematic; all flourished and all decayed; all had a beginning and an end.”⁴⁸⁴ The idea of the “redemptive history” and millennialist revival then arose as a counter-tradition according to him, whereas, for Bell and Huntington, these were

⁴⁸² Ibid., pp. 260-261.

⁴⁸³ Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History*, pp. 27-29; Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements*.

⁴⁸⁴ Therefore, they were closer to the Machiavellian understanding of the republic, as construed by Pocock. Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History*, p. 4.

rather different faces of the contradictory elements enshrined in the American Creed. The 1980s brought a revival of not only the private but also the *national* interest, a seemingly paradoxical coincidence of the restriction of the state *domestically* while expanding its activism in the *international* sphere.⁴⁸⁵ This paradox, as will be noted below, appeared most visibly in the neoconservative thinking, which, by this time, was understood as the most prominent source of an exceptionalist foreign-policy ideology.

EXCEPTIONALISM AS THE IDEOLOGY OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

Before turning to the role of neoconservatism in the ideational transformation, we conclude this section by noting how exceptionalism began to refer to the ideas that drove American foreign policy in this era. This notion, however, appeared in two distinct forms: for some, Reagan's policies were an exception to the non-ideological American tradition (or, at least, they meant a re-ideologization of foreign policy) while others regarded them as a re-articulation – albeit more clearly and forcefully made than by his immediate predecessors – of the same ideology that had defined U.S. foreign relations for a long time. The former characterized the argument of Holbrooke and McPherson as they accused Reagan of pursuing “ideologically based foreign policies,” while Schlesinger also lamented a “mighty comeback of the messianic approach to foreign policy.”⁴⁸⁶ In a revival reminiscent of the “national character” studies of the late 1940s and 1950s, now several authors examined the “national style” of foreign policy

⁴⁸⁵ While Schlesinger examined both domestic and foreign policy cycles, he noted that these do not necessarily coincide. Still, he believed that there was some connection between the two: “For each phase of the domestic cycle defines the national interest in terms of its own values. Each uses foreign policy to project those values abroad. Public-purpose eras tend to incorporate into foreign policy ideas of democracy, reform, human rights, civil liberties, social change, affirmative government. Such eras display a preference abroad for democratic center-left regimes. Private-interest eras tend to conceive international affairs in terms of capitalism, private investment, the magic of the marketplace, the defense of American corporations doing business in foreign lands. Such eras display a preference abroad for right-wing and authoritarian regimes that promise the protection for private capital. So the conduct of foreign affairs breathes the spirit of the alternations in the domestic cycle, while the intensity in which this spirit is imposed on the world depends on phases in the foreign cycle.” Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History*, p. 45.

⁴⁸⁶ McPherson and Holbrooke, “A Foreign Policy for the Democrats,” p. 30; Arthur Schlesinger Jr. “Foreign policy and the American character,” *Foreign Affairs* 62(1) (Fall 1983), p. 5.

which brought to the fore the question of uniqueness.⁴⁸⁷ This national style, in the words of Knud Krakau, stems from a “nation’s basic assumptions and beliefs about the world and its own role or place in it;” according to him, in the American case, it appeared in the belief in exceptionalism, in America’s liberal outlook, but also in the traditionally nonideological nature of foreign policy. However, Krakau claimed that the “[b]elief in the nonideological quality of foreign policy may turn out to be supreme ideology” and Schlesinger also noted the paradox that despite America’s highly-valued pragmatism, there is also “a recurrent vulnerability to spacious generalities.”⁴⁸⁸ Therefore, the tension between universalism and particularism was manifested in yet another way: in the contradiction of the “nonideological ideology” that, arguably, became more rigid under Reagan.

At the same time, Michael Hunt elaborated a more expansive understanding of ideology in his 1987 book in which he disputed what Krakau and Schlesinger described as the traditional ideology-free American approach. Hunt claimed that American foreign policy had always been ideological; it was grounded on a combination of the notions of national greatness, racial hierarchy, and – contrary to the prevalent U.S. self-view – a strong anti-revolutionary sentiment. Reagan’s rhetoric was just a new iteration: “Like his ideological forebears, Reagan regarded his own country exceptional,” he noted.⁴⁸⁹ In his conclusion, Hunt suggested disentangling American nationalism from this ideology in order to promote a “more prudent and restrained American policy” based on republican values. Although he acknowledged the risks of “[t]ampering with American nationalism and even partially challenging the sense of exceptionalism that has inspired it,” he believed that it could mean that Americans would

⁴⁸⁷ For the American case, see: Robert Dallek, *The American style of foreign policy: cultural politics and foreign affairs* (New York: 1983); Schlesinger, “Foreign policy and the American character;” Knud Krakau, “American Foreign Relations: A National Style?” *Diplomatic History* 8(3) (Summer 1984), pp. 253-272; Lundestad, “Uniqueness and pendulum swing in US foreign policy.”

⁴⁸⁸ Krakau, “American Foreign Relations,” pp. 255-257; 259; Schlesinger, “Foreign policy and the American character,” p. 1.

⁴⁸⁹ Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 186.

“cease to aspire to global mastery but [they] may gain greater mastery over [their] own national life.”⁴⁹⁰ The underlying assumption in Hunt’s argument was the rejection of the increasingly dominant universalist-activist conception of American foreign policy. However, the criticism of this worldview did not necessarily mean the propagation of particularism and withdrawal.

In a 1987 *Foreign Policy* article, Tami Davis and Sean Lynn-Jones also pointed out that the death of American exceptionalism was declared prematurely as “the United States ha[d] rediscovered its faith in itself” during Reagan’s presidency. In their understanding, exceptionalism did not merely refer to uniqueness or some special qualities, but “also elevate[d] America to a higher moral plane than other countries.” Quoting Max Lerner’s then three-decade old analysis, they concluded that exceptionalism had “become a public myth that provide[d] a philosophical foundation for debates on specific policies, including U.S. foreign policy.”⁴⁹¹ They continued that

[t]he problem with exceptionalism, however, is that, although it can provide the foundation for either messianism or isolationism, it does not serve well as a basis for a policy of sustained and realistic involvement in world affairs. And this is precisely the sort of policy needed today by an America that is no longer exceptional in terms of geographic isolation or overwhelming relative power. [...] If Americans place their country on a pedestal, they give themselves two logical policy choices: They must either preserve America’s innocence by shunning involvement with corrupt foreign countries and their sordid, hopeless quarrels, or attempt to re-construct the world in America’s own image.⁴⁹²

Thus, Davis and Lynn-Jones advocated for a policy based on prudence and pragmatism as they rejected both withdrawal and a universal mission. Even if “Americans seem to need to hear periodic reaffirmation of American exceptionalism,” they concluded, this should not “promote simple beliefs in American uniqueness and innocence” as U.S. foreign policy needed to be grounded on realistic assumptions and on the recognition of complexities.⁴⁹³ Similarly, Coral Bell – while noting that exceptionalism oriented the policies of both Carter and Reagan –

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 193, 198.

⁴⁹¹ Tami R. Davis and Sean M. Lynn-Jones, “Citty upon a Hill,” *Foreign Policy* 66 (Spring 1987), pp. 20; 23-24.

⁴⁹² Ibid., pp. 31-32.

⁴⁹³ Ibid., p. 38.

discerned a “Leninist” understanding of the concept given that Reagan’s neoconservative advisers used exceptionalist ideas “to justify indefinite amounts of skullduggery on the rationale of serving a cause vital and virtuous enough to warrant breaking the established rules” instead of committing U.S. policy to higher moral standards than other great powers.⁴⁹⁴ However, as the next section shows, neoconservatives themselves had paradoxical understandings as they formulated their arguments.

Agents of Ideational Transformation: Neoconservatives and Their Paradoxes

A lot has been written about the neoconservative movement, and – particularly because of their later influence during the presidency of George W. Bush – they did not evade controversy either.⁴⁹⁵ Here, I only need to engage with their relevant thoughts regarding the role of American values in foreign policy-making, their assumptions on exceptionalism, and how they arrived at their positions on these issues. But first, it has to be made clear who were (are) the neoconservatives, and whether they accepted this label at all. As often noted, it is hard to define

⁴⁹⁴ Coral Bell, *The Reagan Paradox: American Foreign Policy in the 1980s* (Aldershot, Hants, England: E. Elgar, 1989), p. 140. She also mentioned in an earlier article that both Presidents Carter and Reagan “adhered to the notion of American ‘exceptionalism.’” Coral Bell, “From Carter to Reagan,” *Foreign Affairs* 63(3) (America and the World issue, 1984), p. 491. Michael Vlahos also argued in *Foreign Affairs* that Republicans and Democrats shared the rediscovery of exceptionalist beliefs: Michael Vlahos, “The End of America’s Postwar Ethos,” *Foreign Affairs* 66(5) (Summer 1988), p. 1103.

⁴⁹⁵ There is a wide literature on the neoconservative movement, both in general and in its particular foreign policy aspects. For their early foreign policy views, see: John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1994* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); a later evaluation can be found in: Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). See also: Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), esp. pp. 40-73 on “Origins and Early Development.” From a British perspective, see: Douglas Murray, *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It* (London: Social Affairs unit, 2005), esp. chapters 1-2. Original sources of neoconservative thought are collected in *The Essential Neoconservative Reader*, ed. Mark Gerson; and in two volumes of Irving Kristol’s works: *Reflections of a Neoconservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) and *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: The Free Press, 1995). For later views, see: *Neoconservatism*, ed. Irwin Steltzer (London: Atlantic Books, 2004). The label itself was coined by socialist writer Michael Harrington in the early 1970s to “describe a renegade liberal” like Kristol. Irving Kristol, “Forty Good Years,” *The Public Interest* 159 (Spring 2005), p. 8.

neoconservatism or neoconservative people; the label referred to a way of thinking rather than a school with a clearly-defined set of propositions. Moreover, the thinking of neoconservatives also evolved over time, thus the neoconservatism of the 1980s does not necessarily reflect their ideas and beliefs in the post-Cold War era.

Neoconservatives, in our understanding, are a loosely defined group of public intellectuals who originally belonged to the liberal Cold War consensus, but – for various reasons – became disillusioned with the state of liberalism by the end of the 1960s and early 70s. Their skepticism toward liberal public policies was reflected in the articles of *The Public Interest*; while their strongly anti-Communist (and anti-détente) foreign-policy positions were most clearly articulated in *Commentary*. These journals (together with *Partisan Review* to some extent, though it provided space to a wider range of opinions) witnessed the transformation of the thoughts of these members of the former anti-Stalinist left, first to mainstream liberalism, then even to the rejection of liberal values and policies. However, their end-points were at markedly different stages; for instance, Bell characterized himself as “a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture,” thus he rejected his classification among the neoconservative group.⁴⁹⁶ Kristol was one who – as his *Reflections of a neoconservative* testifies – accepted the label without ambiguity, and he was also the one who probably got closest to conservatism in its traditional meaning.⁴⁹⁷ For his part, Podhoretz believed that “neoconservative” was, in some sense, a misnomer, and they – or at least, their foreign policy beliefs – should rather be characterized as “neonationalists.”⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁶ Bell, “Modernism and Capitalism,” p. 206; See also: Daniel Bell, “Our Country – 1984,” *Partisan Review* 51(4)-52(1) (Fiftieth anniversary double issue, Fall 1984/Winter 1985), pp. 620-637. Bell writes in this article that he resigned from the co-editorship of *The Public Interest* in 1973 and from its publication committee in 1985 because he believed that “friendship is more important than ideology.”

⁴⁹⁷ “I have become conservative, and whatever ambiguities attach to that term, it should be obvious what it does not mean,” he wrote in *Partisan Review*’s fiftieth anniversary issue. Irving Kristol, “Reflections of a Neoconservative,” *Partisan Review* 51(4)-52(1) (Fall 1984/Winter 1985), p. 859.

⁴⁹⁸ Podhoretz, *The Present Danger*, p. 88.

If Huntington described the Hartz/Lipset thesis as “us[ing] Marxist categories to arrive at Tocquevillian conclusions,” neoconservatives had a similar role in employing their original Marxist background for the articulation of conservative/nationalist positions.⁴⁹⁹ Exceptionalism was originally a Marxist category, and even if it was an exaggeration from Coral Bell to compare their positions to Leninism; neocons often took pride in positioning themselves as “revolutionaries.”⁵⁰⁰ But what were they revolting against?

First, as was already noted, neoconservatism emerged as a response to the perceived failures of liberalism within the domestic polity, the foreign policy component only later received greater emphasis. Their distrust of liberalism manifested in their position in the economic, social and cultural spheres simultaneously; a criticism of social engineering and unintended consequences of liberal public policies was amended with a proposed return to the small-scale individualistic roots of American economic policies and with a disavowal of what they experienced as moral relativism in culture, especially at the universities.⁵⁰¹ Consequently, these principles oriented their turn to foreign policy, though the very same principles already contained the seeds of later inner contradictions. Moral relativism was repudiated at the international level too, but the distrust of liberal principles also entailed the rejection of any

⁴⁹⁹ As the editor of the *Neoconservative Reader*, Mark Gerson argues in the preface to the volume, neoconservatives’ training in Marxism also “meant that they were imbued with a sociologically sophisticated way of looking at the way the world works. Educated to approach ideas as coherent systems rather than as conglomerations of isolated issues, the neoconservatives have naturally plunged beneath the surface of social questions, seeking to ascertain the internal logic (or lack of logic) of whatever situations or ideas they are addressing.” Gerson, *The Essential Neoconservative Reader*, p. xvi.

⁵⁰⁰ Coral Bell notes Podhoretz’s rejection of the “neoconservative” label and argues that they “might, in fact, be seen as ‘revolutionaries of the right’ rather than conservatives, in that they wanted to change things, reverse tendencies and developments they saw as disastrous, rather than maintain the status quo.” Bell, *The Reagan Paradox*, p. 10. “We’re closer to being revolutionaries than conservatives,” Richard Perle also declared in 2004, at a later stage of neoconservatism. Murray, *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It*, p. 48.

⁵⁰¹ On the distrust of social engineering: Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads*, pp. 7-11. For economic positions, see: Kristol, “On corporate capitalism in America,” pp. 124-141. While Kristol was also discussing moral relativism, the most clearly articulated rejection can be found in Allan Bloom’s bestselling take against the liberal dominance within academy: Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (London: Penguin Books, 1988). Bloom was a student of Leo Strauss, who also strongly criticized moral relativism. See also: Murray, *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It*, pp. 26-35. Neoconservatives also opposed the rise of affirmative action, adding a racial component to these debates.

overarching international structure and fostered skepticism toward international law. Since there was no “world community,” because of the absence of “serious commitment to law-abidingness of the part of the nations that are supposed to be the citizens of this world community” and because of the lack of an international organization that could enforce international law, “[n]ationalism and national interest [were] still sovereign in international affairs,” Kristol argued.⁵⁰² Therefore, neoconservatives on the one hand were skeptical about the universal relevance of American values and the universalist doctrines of liberalism, however, on the other hand, they still believed that some moral values are universal and that the United States had the ability and moral inclination to act as a force for good internationally.

Second, their attitude to the role of ideologies also unearthed paradoxical assumptions. Certainly, a major distinction from realists (at least from the then-popular version of neorealism) was a strong commitment to accentuate ideational factors in both domestic politics and international relations; this was also part of the legacy from the anti-Stalinist left, and maybe it was one of the few propositions that the later neoconservatives represented consistently throughout their careers. At the same time, Kristol and Bell launched *The Public Interest* with the objective of providing a platform to ideology-free public policy discussions, while in the end, the opposition to the supposedly overextending liberal ideology became ideological itself.⁵⁰³ This was more apparent in foreign policy, and Kristol dealt with the problem in the opening issue of the magazine he founded in 1985 to address exclusively issues of foreign policy and international politics, *The National Interest*. The title of the magazine was itself a telling choice: it was the re-interpretation of a major realist concept (indeed, Owen

⁵⁰² Irving Kristol in: “How Has the United States Met Its Major Challenges Since 1945? A Symposium,” *Commentary* (November 1985), p. 58.

⁵⁰³ That was Bell’s main criticism while leaving the co-editorship of *The Public Interest*. “For Kristol,” he remarked, “today, all politics is ideological, and the issue as to ‘who owns the future’ is which ideology we will be governed by.” Bell, “Our Country – 1984,” p. 634.

Harries and Robert Tucker, both closer to the realist camp, became co-editors) and it also reflected the turn from the public toward the *national interest* in this period.⁵⁰⁴ In “Foreign policy in an age of ideology,” Kristol suggested that Soviet expansionism was especially dangerous because it was based on an expansive ideology which needed to be countered ideologically. The exceptional situation arose because of the special nature of the Cold War as both the U.S. and the USSR “were born out of a self-conscious creed, and whose very existence as nations is justified and defined in creedal terms.”⁵⁰⁵ Liberal internationalism had been “naïve and utopian,” thus a purposefully nationalist-unilateralist response was necessary, which came to be the foreign policy ideology of neoconservatism:

This new conservatism is self-consciously ideological, construing itself as the appropriate response of the American “public philosophy” and the American “national interest” to the condition of democratic capitalism in the last part of the 20th century. Its attitude toward the Soviet Union and its messianic ideology is, therefore, straightforward and uncomplicated: it detests the ideology and believes that the task of American foreign policy is to defeat it – not so that the world can be made “safe for democracy” but so that the nations of the world can have the opportunity to realize whatever potential for popular government and economic prosperity they may possess, or come to possess.⁵⁰⁶

Thus, Kristol reinterpreted the “national interest” to include an ideological element, though it was a limited one in the sense that it did not entail a timeless articulation of American purpose, but a more concrete response to the specific challenge of the Soviet Union at this specific time. At the same time, Podhoretz, and especially Krauthammer understood the American role in a more expansive way, which foreshadowed a post-Cold War break in the neoconservative tradition.⁵⁰⁷ However, whereas Krauthammer defined his position against realists, *The National Interest* remained a platform for both realists and neoconservatives, and to nuanced combinations of these positions: Harries criticized the ideological turn in Kristol’s and

⁵⁰⁴ Although *The Public Interest* was continued under Kristol’s editorship until the first years of the new century, *The National Interest* soon gained much greater attention with its focus on foreign policy.

⁵⁰⁵ Irving Kristol, “Foreign Policy in an Age of Ideology,” *The National Interest* 1 (Fall 1985), p. 8.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵⁰⁷ Norman Podhoretz, “Appeasement by any other name,” *Commentary* (July 1983); Charles Krauthammer, “When to Intervene,” *The New Republic*, May 6, 1985; Krauthammer, “The Price of Power,” *The New Republic*, February 9, 1987; Krauthammer, “The poverty of Realism”

Podhoretz's case against *realpolitik*; Robert Tucker warned American leaders to forsake the crusader role in their international conduct; and Kristol himself reiterated his skepticism toward policies based on human rights.⁵⁰⁸ Harries also highlighted that neoconservatives "put an enormous emphasis on the importance of *will* in confronting and changing the world."⁵⁰⁹ This voluntarism (reflected in the common assumption that Americans lacked the will or spirit to confront the Soviets during the *détente* period, which was changed by Reagan's election) was, Harries noted, contradictory to the distrust in social engineering and fear of unintended consequences, which were certainly important conservative – and neoconservative – principles.

From this, a third paradox of neoconservative foreign policy follows. While within domestic relations, a major point for them was the limitation of the state and the distrust in power, in the international arena, they propagated the buildup of an American state and American power. This was the main objective of the revival during the late 1970s of the *Committee on the Present Danger* (CPD), an organization of policymakers and defense intellectuals – with some overlaps with neocons – lobbying for the overturn of *détente* and "appeasement" to combat America's perceived weakness vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. The CPD discourse, as Simon Dalby showed, combined a threat construction through the constitution of the "Other" in the works of Sovietologists with the revival of a geopolitical/realist discourse, reinforced by the perspectives of nuclear strategists who propagated an understanding of power defined exclusively in terms of military control.⁵¹⁰ Considering that "neoconservatives came rapidly to be seen ... as the foreign policy specialists of the Reagan confederation, as the 'Committee on the Present Danger' came to be seen as its defence specialists," they had a clear opportunity to have an

⁵⁰⁸ Owen Harries, "Neoconservatism and Realpolitik," *The National Interest* 1 (Fall 1985), pp. 124-127; Robert W. Tucker, "Exemplar or Crusader? Reflections on America's role," *The National Interest* 5 (Fall 1986), pp. 64-75; Irving Kristol, "'Human Rights': The Hidden Agenda," *The National Interest* 6 (Winter 1986/87), pp. 3-11.

⁵⁰⁹ Harries, "Neoconservatism and Realpolitik," p. 127. See also: Bell, *The Reagan Paradox*, p. 23.

⁵¹⁰ Simon Dalby, *Creating the Second Cold War: The Discourse of Politics* (New York: Guilford Publications, 1990)

impact on the policy-making process.⁵¹¹ Indeed, the main pillars of Reagan's foreign policy – a vocal anti-Communist language articulated in unambiguous moral terms, the emphasis on military strength, and the Reagan Doctrine – all reflected ideas proposed by either the CPD or neoconservatives. But how was the accumulation of power for foreign policy justified if domestically the Reagan Revolution was all about the limitation of the state? Huntington recognized this problem, as he concluded that the tension around America's role in the world does not lie between “realism” and “moralism,” but stems from “the contradiction between enhancing liberty at home by curbing the power of the American government and enhancing liberty abroad by expanding that power.”⁵¹² According to Huntington, this was yet another manifestation of the IvI gap that defined American exceptionalism; but, for Daniel Bell, the contradiction disappeared because of the separate development of domestic and foreign politics.⁵¹³ At the same time, the previous chapters have showed that an understanding of the interrelatedness of domestic and international concerns often underpinned exceptionalist arguments; in the broader sense, the existence of an exception presupposed a rule of order which, in turn, was perceived to reflect the universally valid elements of domestic arrangements. Ultimately, the tension lay between the original, more particularistic, and a newer, increasingly universalist conception of neoconservatism, which also raised the question whether the exception stemmed from the peculiar character of American politics or rather from the nature of the Soviet challenge: was the United States exceptional or was it the era itself? The conclusion highlights the different responses articulated in the final years of the Cold War.

⁵¹¹ Bell, *The Reagan Paradox*, p. 9. See also on the “CPD ideology”: Stanley Hoffmann, *Dead Ends: American Foreign Policy in the New Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1983), p. 154.

⁵¹² Huntington, *American Politics*, p. 259.

⁵¹³ Bell, “American exceptionalism revisited,” p. 54. See also: Friedberg, “Why Didn't the United States Become a Garrison State?”

Conclusion: Approaching the “Unipolar Moment”

Depending on whether the United States or the Cold War itself was seen as exceptional, optimist and pessimist visions about the nature of international politics ran parallel in the late 1980s. While these discussions all took place in the context of a discursive construction of a “new” or “second cold war” which revived bipolarity as the dominant interpretation about the structure of global politics and even though Reagan’s “negotiation from strength” strategy gained support, there were still disagreements about where the superpower rivalry was heading.⁵¹⁴ Not coincidentally, certain discourses of the early Cold War period were revived: the CPD itself was originally established in 1950 in order to promote policies suggested by Paul Nitze and Dean Acheson for the militarization of the Cold War; the second incarnation in 1976 went back to these roots. Similarly, neoconservatives consciously re-animated and even appropriated the 1952 *Partisan Review* symposium on “Our Country and Our Culture” – eliciting protests from the editor of PR⁵¹⁵ – and Lerner’s *America as a Civilization* was republished for its thirtieth anniversary edition in 1987. These constructions of a re-intensified ideological confrontation suggested a pessimistic assessment of America’s prospects, raising again the question whether the U.S. could defy the seemingly inevitable fate of great powers. Indeed, even as Gorbachev rose to power, Joseph Kraft claimed that Bell’s statement on “the end of American exceptionalism” had become “a strategic reality” because the United States was now “a power *comme les autres*,” while Richard Holbrooke also believed that the U.S.

⁵¹⁴ Of course, the dominant interpretation of a revived bipolarity was also contested. For instance, Stanley Hoffmann claimed that “a Cold War strategy rests on an incomplete analysis of the international system and is capable of leading only to confrontations that heighten the risk for world order and international security.” Hoffmann, *Dead Ends*, p. 2.

⁵¹⁵ William Phillips, “Our Country and Our Culture,” *Partisan Review* 51(1) (Winter 1984), pp. 7-10. See also: Bell, “Our Country – 1984;” Phillips, “Our Country and Our Culture,” *Partisan Review* 51(4)/52(1) (Fall 1984/Winter 1985), pp. 773-780.

was no longer “the world’s sole military and economic superpower.”⁵¹⁶ On the other hand, Charles Krauthammer envisioned a more extensive superpower role with the use of American power “in the service of some higher value,” while Lerner declared in a new postscript chapter to his classic that the “exceptionalism of America, through some attractive forces within it, had moved out into the world and achieved a measure of universalism.”⁵¹⁷

The particularist-universalist dichotomy split through the ranks of neoconservatives and in the pages of their flagship publications. While Kristol feared an ideological challenge posed by the Soviet Union, Tucker noted in the same magazine that the Soviet threat no longer “rest[ed] ... on the ideology, which ha[d] been substantially discredited, but on the military power of the Soviet state.”⁵¹⁸ In the end, Tucker’s description proved to be much closer to reality than the threat inflation reminiscent of the 1950s, in fact, after its ideology was discredited, the Soviet Union soon ceased to pose the same military danger or even to exist. Even amid the anxiety about the future superpower role of the United States, confidence was gradually regained, most pronouncedly appearing in Krauthammer’s sweeping endorsement of universal or even imperial responsibilities.⁵¹⁹ As the Cold War was moving towards its conclusion, Krauthammer outlined his vision for a post-Cold War order, a “unipolar world whose center is a confederated West,” also as a response to Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis:

The goal, one might say, is the world as described by Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama’s provocation was to assume that the end – what he calls the common marketization of the world – is either here or inevitably dawning. It is neither. The West has to make it happen, and for that, the United States has to wish it. It has to wish and work for a super-sovereign West economically, culturally, and politically hegemonic in the world.

How is this vision different from the naïve nonsense of earlier one-world visions? The old universalism (c. 1945) of the United Nations variety was based on the fallacy that structure begets community; that

⁵¹⁶ Joseph Kraft in: “How has the United States met its major challenges since 1945?” *Commentary* (November 1985), p. 53; Richard Holbrooke in: “Are we moving toward a new foreign policy consensus?” *The National Interest* 4 (Summer 1986), p. 3.

⁵¹⁷ Krauthammer, “The Price of Power;” Krauthammer, “The Poverty of Realism,” p. 19; Max Lerner, “Myth America,” *The New Republic*, September 7, 1987, p. 12.

⁵¹⁸ Tucker, “Exemplar or Crusader?,” pp. 65–66.

⁵¹⁹ Although Krauthammer acknowledged the role strains stemming from “the dilemmas of democratic versus superpower responsibilities.” Krauthammer, “The Price of Power,” p. 25.

once we established the parliament of man, a world community would begin to emerge from it. The new universalism is based on the contrary notion that community begets structure: that if one begins with community, the smaller community of Western democratic nations, out of it will emerge the universal structure to which others can attach themselves over time.⁵²⁰

Unlike Fukuyama, Krauthammer favored an *activist* propagation of this “new universalism,” which, in fact, meant Western hegemony, as he underlined in his very last sentence: “I suggest that we go all the way and stop at nothing short at universal dominion.”⁵²¹ Although in this piece he also showed some skepticism about the feasibility of the project by characterizing the emerging new world as a “multipolar system that retains some elements of bipolarity,” he became more confident when he reformulated the argument in *Foreign Affairs* under the title “The Unipolar Moment.” There, he was unambiguous: “The post-Cold War world is not multipolar. It is unipolar. The center of the world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies.”⁵²² Unipolarity was now presented as an unquestionable fact, which also left no doubt on the preferred role for the United States within this new order.

Just as the events of 1989-91 were unfolding rapidly, the redefinition of the structure of international politics occurred extremely fast. However, those neoconservatives who believed that it was the Cold War that had been exceptional could not follow Krauthammer’s bold vision. As the threat posed by the Soviets was over, particularists wanted a return to a foreign policy based on a more narrowly defined national interest (as Kristol suggested) and the U.S. – as Kirkpatrick outlined – to become “a normal country in a normal time.”⁵²³ Nonetheless, from the universalist end of the spectrum, Ben Wattenberg proposed a “neo-manifest destinarianism,” an even more openly-acknowledged quest for global hegemony based on the

⁵²⁰ Charles Krauthammer, “Universal Dominion: Toward a Unipolar World,” *The National Interest* 18 (Winter 1989/90), pp. 46-49. Fukuyama’s thesis was originally published as: “The End of History?” *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3-18.

⁵²¹ Krauthammer, “Universal Dominion,” p. 49.

⁵²² Ibid., p. 46; Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” p. 23.

⁵²³ Irving Kristol, “Defining Our National Interest,” *The National Interest* 21 (Fall 1990), pp. 16-25; Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, “A Normal Country in a Normal Time,” *The National Interest* 21 (Fall 1990), pp. 40-44.

“distinctive features” of American democracy and on the assumption that “[m]ost Americans believe that most of [American] exceptionalism is beneficial.”⁵²⁴ The ideational transformation was successful: exceptionalism was now invoked in support of a hegemonistic vision of world order even though some earlier proponents had more cautious views. Therefore, the concept was simplified and hardened into – in Ish-Shalom’s term – a *public convention* and already showed that it could turn into a *political conviction* as well. However, this change masked the inner contradictions of the new understanding which upset the balance between particularism and universalism.

This part of my discourse-tracing has shown that exceptionalism was used to reinterpret America’s Cold War role and reassert national confidence in the wake of the debacles of the 1970s. At the *structural* level, a renewed sense of bipolarity defined the decade, while on the *policy* level, neoliberal and neoconservative views confined the possible domestic and international roles of the state. The “second Cold War” was both the crisis that was the source of the changes of the meanings of exceptionalism and the product of those discursive constructs that enabled the re-articulation of the ideological conflict. Meanwhile, domestically, exceptionalism was redefined as the absence of the *state*, in line with the rise of neoliberal economic policies. Among *intellectuals* and *foreign-policy elites*, the term was increasingly connected to a certain group of actors and policies related to the maintenance of an assertive international role; as Wattenberg’s example – an influential public intellectual with close political connections – shows, in the end the term was also embraced by active proponents of this vision. However, some of the complexities of the previous understandings were inevitably lost as exceptionalism now moved into a more directly *political* space. Moreover, the Reagan

⁵²⁴ Ben J. Wattenberg, “Neo-Manifest Destinarianism,” *The National Interest* 21 (Fall 1990), p. 52.

era transformation of the discourse had long-lasting consequences on conceptions of America's role in the world, which will be further explored in Chapter 6.

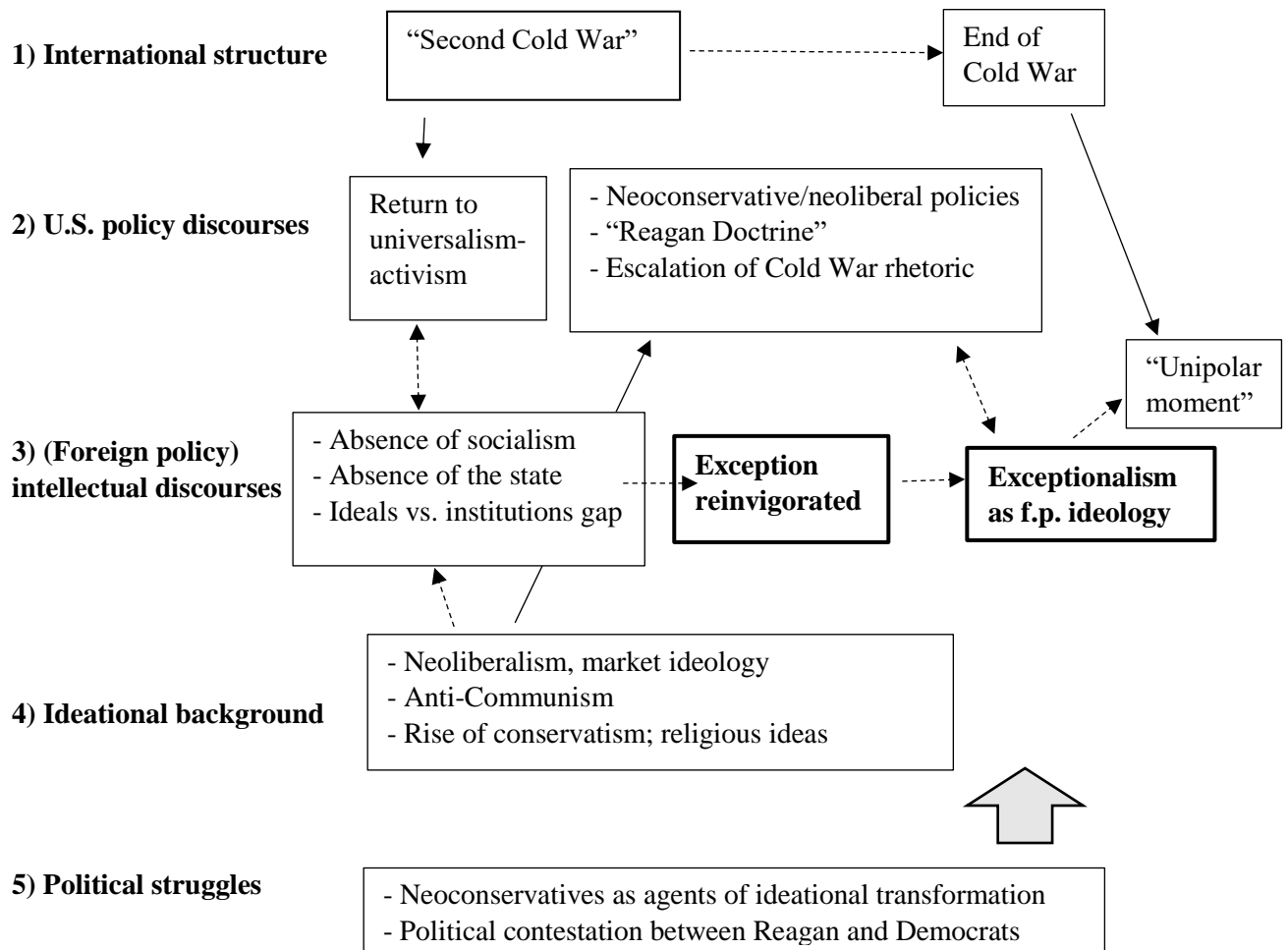


Figure 5. The discourse-tracing of American exceptionalism (1980-91).

Chapter 6 –

Exceptionalism in the “Unipolar Moment”: The Construction of the Post-Cold War Order (1991-2008)

“We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you are studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors, and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”⁵²⁵

In the end, the post-Cold War “unipolar moment” lasted for nearly two decades. However, by the time the presidency of George W. Bush winded down, both the economic and military foundations of the new order began to crumble. Nevertheless, in the period between the Gulf War and the rise of the global financial crisis, the United States was seen as *the* omnipotent manager of the international arena: its global competitors either disappeared (as the Soviet Union) or struggled with developmental slowdowns and internal crises (like Japan and the soon-to-be-reunited Europe), while the U.S. was widely recognized as the only great power able to solve difficult international problems through intervention in cases of emergency. The Cold War’s end was celebrated as the great ideological victory of liberal democracy, whereas the Gulf War – in George H. W. Bush’s words – obliterated the “Vietnam Syndrome” “once and for all;”⁵²⁶ paving the way for the unapologetic use of American power in the name of American values. Universalism and activism underpinned the foreign policy doctrines of the period and exceptionalism was poised to become the manifestation of this ideology – at least, this is what we would expect retrospectively.

However, a closer look at the contemporaneous discourse on America’s global role shows a somewhat more complicated picture: despite all the celebrations of Americans having regained

⁵²⁵ The National, “Walk It Back,” *Sleep Well Beast*, 4AD, 2017. This is originally from a senior advisor to George W. Bush, quoted in: Ron Suskind, “Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush,” *The New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 17, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html>.

⁵²⁶ Bush quoted in: McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 146.

their confidence in the Reagan years, the approach to a post-Cold War world was marked by uncertainties. Although the U.S. emerged as victorious from the Cold War, the atmosphere was far from celebratory; debates on American decline were not yet overcome and Americans themselves were also exhausted by the long ideological struggle.⁵²⁷ In the end, only the rapid military victory of the Gulf War led to the inundation of national pride, which – compared to the essentially muted reaction to the end of the Cold War – made Robert Tucker and David Hendrickson observe that “the response to each event appears almost inversely proportionate to its significance.”⁵²⁸ Still, the general public became disconnected from the elite and policy discussions about a “new world order”: while the success over Saddam Hussein’s forces temporarily catapulted Bush’s approval ratings to previously unseen levels, by the time of the 1992 presidential election, his popularity had evaporated and the double challenge by Ross Perot’s populism and Bill Clinton’s “it’s the economy, stupid” message diverted attention to domestic issues. Neither Clinton’s successful campaign nor the subsequent Republican takeover of Congress featured prominently in international politics; in fact, the only foreign policy-related point in Newt Gingrich’s “Contract with America” included a stipulation of withdrawing U.S. troops from peacekeeping operations “under UN command.”⁵²⁹ The American electorate seemingly wanted its *peace dividend* and a restoration of the virtues of the domestic polity instead of perpetuating unlimited global commitments.

This was the context in which the exceptionalist discourse further broadened and became more prevalent, proliferating into the language of academy, intellectual commentary, and – finally – politics. However, once again with reference to Ish-Shalom’s terminology, the *theoretical*

⁵²⁷ As a U.S. official remarked, Americans also “crossed the finish line out of breath.” Quoted in: Peter Beinart, *The Icarus Syndrome* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), p. 246. See also: Tucker and Hendrickson, *The Imperial Temptation*, pp. 2-5.

⁵²⁸ Tucker and Hendrickson, *The Imperial Temptation*, p. 1.

⁵²⁹ At the same time, Gingrich also proposed to restore funding for national security. U.S. House of Representatives, *Republican Contract with America* (1994). Retrieved from *The Internet Archive*, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990427174200/http://www.house.gov/house/Contract/CONTRACT.html>.

construct of the scholarly understanding of exceptionalism was simplified into *public conventions* of intellectual discussions, then turned into *political convictions* by political entrepreneurs “who attempt[ed] to change their political environment and innovate policies according to a well-deliberated agenda.”⁵³⁰ At the same time, the situation is more complicated in the sense that the clear delineation between these understandings is not entirely possible. As previous chapters have shown, those who formulated exceptionalist arguments have often had complex motivations, and, although the separation between scholarly and political, and domestic and international, usage was clearer in the 1990s than before, these were not entirely distinct endeavors even then. For instance, Seymour Martin Lipset’s *American Exceptionalism*, often viewed as the main work analyzing exceptionalism in a scholarly and objective manner, included the admission that he had written it “also as a proud American;” prompting one of its reviewers to describe his argument as “culturally nationalist” which “sets out to ‘regenerate the national community’ in the wake of crisis.”⁵³¹ Crisis, exception and order were in interplay again; though, from this, the question immediately arises what sort of crisis and what sort of order are meant here.

To some extent, even the success in the Cold War can be conceived as a crisis; namely, as a crisis of U.S. “foreign policy identity,” in the sense Guzzini used the concept in his examination of the revival of geopolitical thought.⁵³² The U.S. discourse, however, turned toward a reinvigoration of exceptionalist beliefs rather than geopolitics, formulating a vision for a post-Cold War order in which it was possible to reconcile competing U.S. self-conceptions of a “sovereign equal,” a “great power,” and a “unipole,” while also reflecting the tension between universality and particularity. Furthermore, for the first time in the half-century since Pearl

⁵³⁰ Ish-Shalom, “Theory as a Hermeneutical Mechanism,” p. 572.

⁵³¹ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 14; J. Victor Koschmann, “The Nationalism of Cultural Uniqueness,” *The American Historical Review* 102(3) (Jun. 1997), p. 768.

⁵³² Guzzini, “The framework of analysis,” pp. 55-57.

Harbor, internal and external components of the exceptionalist discourse seemingly diverged as the public by and large became disinterested in international affairs. Tellingly, Lipset's book largely ignored issues of foreign policy – except for passing references mentioning that moralism “has determined the American style in foreign relations generally,”⁵³³ – a significant deviation from previous similar works of Louis Hartz and Max Lerner in the 1950s, or even Samuel Huntington in the 1980s, who all ended their extensive examinations of American civilization or development with an outlook on the U.S. role in the world.

Consequently, the issue of foreign policy retreated to discussions of the foreign policy elite. Nevertheless, it was this elite-driven foreign policy discourse in which exceptionalist arguments flourished, reaching also political influence in the wake of the 9/11 attacks when – following a new sense of vulnerability – the domestic and international sides of exceptionalism were visibly reconnected. This final chapter, therefore, explores how foreign policy became the important topic of exceptionalist writings and utterances and in what sense the invocations of exceptionalism contributed to the transformation of the post-Cold War order. In line with the discourse-tracing outlined so far, I will focus on different manifestations of the exceptionalist ideas during the whole period while also pointing out the contestations over the meaning of the term. Hence, the chapter construes exceptionalism as an *ongoing, contested discursive construction, which aimed to present alternative conceptions of a post-Cold War order and to justify the U.S. role in it while adjusting its particularist methods to the universalist assumptions underpinning said order*. Those who articulated exceptionalism could build on the ideational path that was explored in previous chapters; at the same time, political entrepreneurs (especially neoconservatives) embraced and transformed the concept in order to advance a particular agenda of U.S. primacy. However, in the end, the inner contradiction of

⁵³³ Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 20. See also his remark on the role of moralism in military endeavors such as the Gulf War on p. 28.

the idea became apparent as the “unipolar moment” reached its crisis partly as a result of a conception of the “American order” that emphasized *American* more than *order*.

Whereas exceptionalism appeared in various contexts in the post-Cold War era as the discourse became more far-reaching, this chapter will concentrate on the part that is central to our argument, namely, foreign policy. The first section, then, highlights how the foreign policy literature understands “exceptionalism” with respect to this time-period, also outlining how those differ from how I proceed here. The second section reviews the possible sources of the “exception” in post-Cold War policies, noting an understanding of “benevolent hegemony” which became important in the arguments of neoconservatives. From this, the third section presents competing understandings of exception and order: a particularist challenge to the universalist post-Cold War dominance; an unsuccessful attempt to reinterpret exceptionalism from a universalist-withdrawal angle; and finally, the variations for the dominant activism and universalism under the G. H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations. This leads to the fourth section which explores how the exceptionalist discourse was mobilized in support of the neoconservative vision for a new *American* order before and during the presidency of George W. Bush. However, this order was widely rejected; thus, in conclusion, I note how a *lack* of order – together with self-contradictions and hubris – contributed to a new sense of crisis during which exceptionalism was politicized more directly than ever before.

Exceptionalism in the Post-Cold War World: The Bush Doctrine or an Ever-Present Ideology?

While, as will be clear from this analysis, the issue of American exceptionalism was already discussed extensively in the 1990s in the context of U.S. foreign policy, it gained more attention

following the responses of the George W. Bush administration to the 9/11 attacks. Bush's universalist and activist language, combined with his unilateralist tools, made some observers equate the concept with *exemptionalism*, the selective application of international law from which the U.S. could be exempted due to its unique status.⁵³⁴ Even when acknowledging (some) past existence of the exceptionalist tradition, the significance of the "Bush Doctrine" was noted as a development that exacerbated the problem by making "double standards – the most virulent strain of American exceptionalism – not just the exception, but the rule."⁵³⁵ Furthermore, John Gerard Ruggie, who distinguished the broader exceptionalist traditions from the impulse of exemptionalism as one particular form of it, claimed that the "Bush administration has been far more hospitable to the exemptionalist agenda than any of its predecessors."⁵³⁶ Therefore, a prevalent view was that the Bush Doctrine represented an important change; a unilateralist divergence from the multilateralist order that was more-or-less in place during the first post-Cold War decade.⁵³⁷

However, other scholars take issue with this characterization. As was mentioned in previous chapters, Restad emphasizes the continuities in the exceptionalist tradition; hence, she claims that "the end of the cold war, while a significant change in the international structure, did not

⁵³⁴ See, for example, Nicholas J. Wheeler, "The Bush Doctrine: The Dangers of American Exceptionalism in a Revolutionary Age," *Asian Perspective* 27(4) (2003), pp. 183-216; Ian Clark, *Legitimacy in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 234.

⁵³⁵ Koh, "On American exceptionalism," p. 1500. See also: Koh, "America's Jekyll-and-Hyde Exceptionalism," in: Ignatieff, ed., *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, pp. 111-143; Michael Ignatieff, "Introduction: American Exceptionalism and Human Rights," in: Ibid., pp. 1-26; G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, "Liberal Realism: The Foundations of a Democratic Foreign Policy," *The National Interest*, no. 77 (Fall 2004), pp. 38-49; Barry Buzan, "A Leader Without Followers? The United States in World Politics after Bush," *International Politics* 45 (2008), pp. 554-570. On the Bush doctrine, cf. Robert Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly* 118(3) (Fall 2003), pp. 365-388.

⁵³⁶ John Gerard Ruggie, "American Exceptionalism, Exemptionalism, and Global Governance," in: Ignatieff, ed., *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, p. 306.

⁵³⁷ There were certainly qualifications to this argument as it was emphasized that an exceptionalist (or even imperialist) tradition had a long history in American foreign policy and the seeds of unilateralism were already present in the Clinton years. Still, the *extent* of unilateralism under Bush was understood as a qualitatively new development. See: Clyde Prestowitz, *Rogue Nation: American Unilateralism and the Failure of Good Intentions* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), esp. pp. 30-35; 272-284; Beinart, *The Icarus Syndrome*.

herald significant change in U.S. foreign policy,” moreover, this policy was motivated by “unilateral internationalism” throughout the whole period, and so 9/11 and the Bush Doctrine did little to alter the dominant approach to global politics.⁵³⁸ Similarly, McCrisken notes that “the basic premise [of exceptionalism] has remained constant,” while Holsti, who characterizes exceptionalism as a rare but not unique type of foreign policy, also points out its *longevity* in the American tradition.⁵³⁹ Hughes also concurs on the issue that exceptionalism under George W. Bush “was neither an aberration in US foreign policy nor did it end when Bush left office.”⁵⁴⁰ In addition, similar conclusions were made by authors who have critically examined how specific linguistic constructs and discourses related to exceptionalism and uniqueness constitute social realities. Anders Stephanson reconstructed how and with what effect the idea of “Manifest Destiny” contributed to “the way the United States came to understand itself in the world and still does,” while David Campbell aimed to demonstrate that “the practices of Foreign Policy serve to enframe, limit and domesticate a particular identity.”⁵⁴¹ These insights can shed light on the connection between the domestic and external sides of the exceptionalist discourse, though their emphasis on the *unchanged* nature of these practices of identity construction make them less able to uncover the subtle shifts under examination here.⁵⁴²

Therefore, the argument to be outlined below differs from both the “Bush Doctrine shift” and the “continuity” positions in important regards. First, Restad and Hughes are correct in pointing out that George W. Bush did not bring a break as sharp as some of his critics (or admirers)

⁵³⁸ Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 198; 206.

⁵³⁹ McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 183; K. J. Holsti, “Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy: Is It Exceptional?”, *European Journal of International Relations* 17(3) (2011), p. 402. At the same time, McCrisken notes the distinction between the exemplary and missionary strands of exceptionalism.

⁵⁴⁰ Hughes, “Unmaking an exception,” p. 529.

⁵⁴¹ For Campbell, this characterizes *any* foreign policy discourse, though, for the U.S. – as being the “imagined community *par excellence*” – this is possibly more relevant. Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, p. xiv; David Campbell, *Writing Security* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 158; 251. See also: Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy*. But for a different view on Stephanson’s “reification” of “Manifest Destiny” as a “timeless category,” see also: Hughes, “Unmaking an exception,” pp. 539-540.

⁵⁴² See also: Jennifer Milliken, “The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods,” *European Journal of International Relations* 5(2) (Jun. 1999), pp. 246-248.

would claim. This chapter shows that, in broad terms, Bush continued the universalist-activist line that was dominant throughout the post-Cold War era. Undoubtedly, both his father and Clinton also relied on unilateralist tools when they deemed it necessary and they had already extended the legitimacy of American intervention to counter the “Vietnam syndrome,” as McCricken demonstrates. Both administrations envisioned an *American order*, containing all its self-contradictions and tensions between universality and particularity that came to surface in the post-9/11 period. However, this order under Bush Sr. and Clinton was still, at least in theory, based on multilateralist principles, while, during the administration of the younger Bush, liberal internationalism lost what Tony Smith called – following Niebuhr’s expression – its “fortunate vagueness” as it hardened into an ideology.⁵⁴³ Thus, what George W. Bush and his nationalist and neoconservative advisers pursued was *more American than order*, which, ultimately, was a major reason behind the failure of these policies.⁵⁴⁴ Consequently, in accordance with the preceding chapters, “exceptionalism” is analyzed here as a moving concept, which enables me to pay attention to its different functions suggested by its various proponents (and opponents). Furthermore, I uncover how the term was employed by those “political entrepreneurs” who promoted a specific policy transformation. In the end, the distinction made by self-declared exceptionalists between their ideas and those of liberal internationalism are the clearest sign that they *were* arguing for some sort of a shift in U.S. foreign policy – even if this shift took place in the wider context of continuity. The next section goes back to the early 1990s to see in what sense the U.S. could be conceived as exceptional under the new structural conditions. Then, I move to the various solutions presented to deal with the problem of order and exception.

⁵⁴³ Smith, *America’s Mission*, p. 351; Smith, *Why Wilson Matters*, pp. 4-5; 229-234.

⁵⁴⁴ “More American than order” is similar to Restad’s argument that “*American* hegemony – as opposed to *American hegemony* – was significant.” While she understands this with relevance to the whole post-WWII order, here I highlight the shifts under George W. Bush though these shifts, of course, did not happen out of nowhere. Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 179.

Exception from What? The Rise of “Benevolent Hegemony”

The end of the Cold War saw a significant resurgence in the scholarly use of exceptionalism. Even as many historians turned toward the analysis of inter- and transnational – or, oppositely, regional – tendencies, questions of uniqueness framed the discussions. However, amid the fall of Soviet-style regimes, there was a widespread belief that capitalism would provide the general developmental path, which would make any suggestions of exceptionalism obsolete.⁵⁴⁵ Still, in his famous work on the topic, Seymour Martin Lipset declared that “America continues to be qualitatively different” due to the peculiar mix of the values of the American Creed, and he aimed to prove this *quantitatively* as well by using different measures such as statistical data and value surveys.⁵⁴⁶ However, while Lipset’s book was praised in the press as a “masterpiece” that is “a rigorous antidote to [Americans’] wild mood swings,” historians and academic reviewers were more critical.⁵⁴⁷ Reviewers believed that Lipset’s methodology provided an “ahistorical and decontextualized” explanation which “cannot account for shifts, reversals, and redefinitions.”⁵⁴⁸ More importantly, Lipset’s quest for an *objective* analysis of the distinctive

⁵⁴⁵ The debate among historians about the usefulness of exceptionalism as a concept began with Ian Tyrrell’s attack on exceptionalist historiography in his “American Exceptionalism in the Age of International History,” *The American Historical Review* 96(4) (Oct. 1991), pp. 1031-1055. Exceptionalism was also rejected in: Joyce Appleby, “Recovering America’s Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism,” *The Journal of American History* 79(2) (Sep. 1992), pp. 419-431. But see also: Michael McGerr, “The Price of the ‘New Transnational History,’” *The American Historical Review* 96(4) (Oct. 1991), pp. 1056-1067 (with Tyrrell’s response on pp. 1068-1072 of the same issue); Michael Kammen, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration,” *American Quarterly* 45(1) (Mar. 1993), pp. 1-43; Rodgers, “Exceptionalism,” pp. 30-36; Thomas Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), esp. pp. 4-7, 296-297. On the continuation of the debate on American socialism, see the contributions in the edited volume *American Exceptionalism? US Working-Class Formation in an International Context*, eds. Rick Halpern and Jonathan Morris (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1997). See also: Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn’t Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

⁵⁴⁶ Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 26.

⁵⁴⁷ Martin Walker, “Why We Are Who We Are,” *The Washington Post*, Apr. 7, 1996, p. 4; Woody West, “The American Creed,” *The Weekly Standard*, February 26, 1996, p. 37.

⁵⁴⁸ Mary Nolan, “Against Exceptionalisms,” *The American Historical Review* 102(3) (Jun. 1997), pp. 770-771. See also: Koschmann, “The Nationalism of Cultural Uniqueness,” p. 760; H. V. Nelles, “American exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword,” review essay on Lipset’s *American Exceptionalism*, *The American Historical Review* 102(3) (Jun. 1997), pp. 749-757.

characteristics of American society was also problematic given that he – as even he himself admitted – could not completely avoid subjective elements in his writing. Although Lipset took pains to emphasize that he was not talking about superiority because exceptionalism had positive and negative aspects (hence the “double-edged sword” in his subtitle), his argument could still be received as “culturally nationalist.” This was further reinforced by Lipset’s treatment of “those who refuse to adhere to the American Creed,” and those – mostly African Americans – who remained, for historical reasons, outside the basic tenets of the Americanist ideology.⁵⁴⁹ Although Lipset’s conception of the American nation – built on certain ideas – was definitely universalist, the argument still opened the way for more particularist and exclusionary interpretations to appear while downplaying the racial or gendered elements of the *ascriptive hierarchy* in America’s hegemonic ideology.⁵⁵⁰

Paradoxically, while Lipset’s thesis was challenged within academia, it further popularized the term among the general public, reinforcing the status of exceptionalism as a public convention. At the same time, the idea was increasingly associated with the new structural conditions in international politics. However, when Joseph Leggold and Timothy McKeown tested a hypothesis which carried a narrow, “measurable” interpretation of exceptionalism related to the assumption that U.S. foreign policy was less reactive to international events than policies by other nations, they did not find much basis for an exception. “If exceptionalism does not imply exceptional behavior, it may not be a very interesting or important argument,” they concluded.⁵⁵¹

Still, among an elite discussing foreign policy, the notion was raised in connection to American hegemony through several interconnected meanings. First, a possible option would have been

⁵⁴⁹ Koschmann, “The Nationalism of Cultural Uniqueness,” p. 768; 765.

⁵⁵⁰ The term “ascriptive hierarchy” is taken from: Rogers M. Smith, “Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America,” *American Political Science Review* 87(3) (Sep. 1993), pp. 549-566. See also: Skowronek, “The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes.”

⁵⁵¹ Leggold and McKeown, “Is American Foreign Policy Exceptional?”, p. 380.

to resign from the role of the hegemon, a truly exceptional reaction from the position of dominance, though it was never part of the mainstream policymaking discourse. Second, this hegemony was viewed as exceptional because of its *longevity*; thus, defying the “rules” of history (the fall of great powers) or International Relations (which would predict the emergence of balancing coalitions against the hegemon). Christopher Layne, a major neorealist critic of unipolarity, discarded this position as a “unipolar illusion,” a new manifestation of American exceptionalism which now appeared as “a transcendent strategy that seeks nothing less than the end of international politics.”⁵⁵² A third possibility was to regard American hegemony as unique because of its ability to *exempt* itself from international law and the rules of conduct that govern the relations of other countries. However, this approach somewhat reduced the scope of uniqueness: in the end, this was just a reflection of the inequalities of power politics, hardly a new feature in the international system, while exemptionalism also ignored the nature of the international environment in which the United States was supposedly the hegemon.

Then, a fourth understanding emphasized that it was the *practice of hegemony* itself that was deemed to be exceptional. Those who argued for a “benevolent hegemony” imagined the U.S. to be a *different kind* of great power, one that uses its primacy for the benefit of some general good. These notions usually rested on a certain understanding of global order, emphasized by policymakers and foreign policy intellectuals throughout the 1990s. In this sense, these concepts did not (only) emphasize the exceptionality of American foreign policy but rather focused on the uniqueness of a new post-Cold War rules-based order in which the U.S., of

⁵⁵² Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion,” *International Security* 17(4) (Spring 1993), p. 50. Layne predicted in 1993 the rapid demise of unipolarity, which obviously did not happen, thus he had to reconsider his argument (though not its ultimate conclusion) in his “The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States’ Unipolar Moment,” *International Security* 31(2) (Fall 2006), pp. 7-41. In contrast, others believed that the U.S. could successfully maintain its hegemonic position and prevent the rise of balancing coalitions as other countries rather choose to “bandwagon.” This argument was most famously put forward in: William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24(1) (Summer 1999), pp. 5-41; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

course, had a distinguished role.⁵⁵³ However, when the emphasis moved from the order to the particular American role, problems naturally arose. This will be examined in the context of the new neoconservative agenda, but first, we shall examine the alternative conceptions of exception and order as outlined in the 1990s.

Exception and Order: Alternatives in the 1990s

In relation to the post-1989 resurgence of geopolitical thought in Europe, Guzzini defines foreign-policy identity crisis as an “anxiety over a new, a newly questioned or a newly acquired self-understanding or role in world affairs” which arises when “the smooth continuation of [a foreign-policy tradition’s] interpretative dispositions encounters problems, as taken-for-granted self-understandings and role positions are openly challenged, and eventually undermined.”⁵⁵⁴ The previous chapters have shown how a “Cold War identity” was reinforced through various discursive constructions, thus it is plausible that “taken-for-granted self-understandings and role positions” were threatened as the Cold War was now over. Indeed, despite the celebrations of the ideological victory, discussions about the configuration of a post-Cold War world were interwoven with anxiety and uncertainty among the foreign-policy elite. According to Campbell, who understood the Cold War as “a struggle related to the production and reproduction of identity,” the collapse of the Soviet Union represented a “crisis of representation,” which led to the emergence of new constructions of external threats such as the “war on drugs” or the much-exaggerated challenge from Japan.⁵⁵⁵ These threat

⁵⁵³ One leading theoretician of this rules-based order, G. John Ikenberry in fact wrote about a “liberal democratic exceptionalism” and not of an American one. G. John Ikenberry, “Salvaging the G-7,” *Foreign Affairs* 72(2) (Apr. 1993), p. 139.

⁵⁵⁴ Guzzini, “The framework of analysis,” pp. 46-47.

⁵⁵⁵ Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. 195. On the “war on drugs” discourse see pp. 195-222; on the “Japanese threat,” see pp. 223-243.

constructions also bolstered exclusionary practices and particularist ideas, most notably in the return of nativist politics in the fringes of the Republican Party, but also affecting more mainstream currents in the type of exceptionalism outlined by Newt Gingrich during his “Republican Revolution.” However, some, though ultimately unsuccessfully, suggested a “return” to an “original,” exemplarist understanding of exceptionalism, while the dominant political forces could use the crisis to reaffirm a universalist and activist role with a distinctive understanding of order. These positions will be explored below (see Table 9).

Table 9. Positions on America’s foreign-policy role (1990s).

	Universalism	Particularism
Activism	“new world order” (Bush Sr.); “indispensable nation” (Clinton/Albright); new neocons (W. Kristol-Kagan)	Gingrich Revolution <div>Kissinger / I. Kristol / Kirkpatrick</div>
Withdrawal	Exemplarism, “Old Testament” (Tucker-Hendrickson; McDougall)	Nativism / “new nationalism” (Buchanan); Realism (Kennan)

THE PARTICULARIST CHALLENGE: REALISM, NATIVISM, AND THE GINGRICH REVOLUTION

Realist and neorealist scholars raised concerns about the reaffirmation of exceptionalism: partly they rejected the idea in theory, partly they viewed it as a poor guide for action in practice. Leading neorealists like Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer precluded an exceptional American role due to structural reasons – given that they predicted the decline of the Western alliance amid an unavoidable rise of balancing against the United States,⁵⁵⁶ – while classical

⁵⁵⁶ According to Waltz, the post-Cold War demanded “forbearance that will give other countries at long last the chance to deal with their own problems and to make their own mistakes.” Kenneth Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* 18(2) (Fall 1993), p. 79. See also: Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion;” John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security* 15(1) (Summer 1990), pp. 5-56.

realists doubted the feasibility and meaningfulness of a policy based on a distinguished American status. Stanley Hoffmann claimed once again that the belief in exceptionalism was “of little help” in dealing with the challenges of the changed international landscape, and Henry Kissinger – who had not used this concept in his previous writings – also saw it as something that inhibited flexible diplomacy even though he recognized the past importance of the idea.⁵⁵⁷ Consequently, he was also skeptical about its future relevance:

America will be the greatest and most powerful nation, but a nation with peers; the *primus inter pares*, nonetheless a nation like others. The American exceptionalism that is the indispensable basis for a Wilsonian foreign policy is therefore likely to be less relevant to the coming century.⁵⁵⁸

Interestingly, Kissinger’s position coincided with that of his former ideological opponents, early neoconservatives such as Irving Kristol and Jeane Kirkpatrick. Kirkpatrick believed Americans should not devote resources to democracy building and development promotion, while Kristol, the “godfather” of neoconservatism, now pronounced that exceptionalism, as a foreign policy doctrine, was over: “We are a world power, and a world power is not a ‘city on a hill,’ a ‘light unto the nations’ – phrases that, with every passing year, ring more hollow.”⁵⁵⁹ Kristol did not reject activism completely, but rather advocated for a more circumscribed understanding of the *national interest* – in line with the positions articulated by the co-editors of the magazine *The National Interest*. Owen Harries and Michael Lind embraced a prescriptive version of realism, emphasizing their skepticism toward hegemonistic ambitions and about democracy and human rights promotion. Nevertheless, they recognized that in America, “realist foreign policies are disguised by moral or ideological language to an even

⁵⁵⁷ Stanley Hoffmann, “A New World and Its Troubles,” *Foreign Affairs* 69(4) (Fall 1990), p. 118. A somewhat different take by Hoffmann on exceptionalism can be found in his “More Perfect Union: Nation and Nationalism in America” *Harvard International Review* 20(1) (Winter 1997), pp. 72-75. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, pp. 668-676.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 810.

⁵⁵⁹ Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, “What You Won’t Hear at Tonight’s Debate: We Have a Vacuum in Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Post*, October 6, 1996, pp. C1-2; Kristol quoted in: Gordon S. Wood, “Doing the Continental,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 20, 1997, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1997/11/20/doing-the-continental-2/>. Kristol still believed though that America’s conservatism was “exceptional.” See: Irving Kristol, “America’s ‘exceptional’ conservatism,” in: Kristol, *Neoconservatism*, pp. 373-386.

greater extent than they are in other countries.”⁵⁶⁰ Moreover, isolationism was seldom embraced explicitly, though George Kennan continued to believe in a more limited American role when he condemned NATO’s Eastern European expansion as “the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold war era.”⁵⁶¹

On the political front, particularism was displayed in the resurgence of a “new nationalist” or even nativist movement. In a rare primary challenge to an incumbent president, Pat Buchanan derided Bush as a “globalist” while positioning himself a “nationalist.” Foreshadowing Donald Trump’s road to the presidency a quarter-century later, Buchanan distinguished himself from Bush by saying that Bush “believes in some *pax universalis*; we believe in the old republic. He would put America’s wealth and power at the service of some new vague order; we will put America first.”⁵⁶² Buchanan’s support remained limited as he alluded to the name of the isolationist *America First Committee* and rejected the universal scope of American foreign policy. Still, his strong showing in the early primaries and the appeal of his themes – the criticism of multiculturalism and proposals of immigration restriction – brought these issues into mainstream Republican discourses. Two years later, these topics gained more attention when Republicans won a majority in the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years under the leadership of Newt Gingrich.

The themes of the 1994 Republican Revolution underline the above-mentioned crisis of identity: the idea that America as a “national community” needed regeneration reflected the precarious situation of the country in some sense during the early 1990s. Although the U.S.

⁵⁶⁰ Owen Harries and Michael Lind, “Realism and Its Rivals,” *The National Interest* 34 (1993/94 Winter), pp. 110-112. A similar argument was made by former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, who argued for a selectivity in U.S. engagements. James Schlesinger, “Quest for a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 72(1) (America and the World issue, 1992/93), pp. 17-28.

⁵⁶¹ Quoted in: Gaddis, *George F. Kennan*, p. 681. Originally published as: George F. Kennan, “A Faithful Error,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 5, 1997. For a rare intellectually coherent argument in the name of isolationism, see: Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁵⁶² Robin Toner, “Buchanan, Urging New Nationalism, Joins ’92 Race,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 1991, p. B12.

emerged victoriously from the Cold War and dismantled the “Vietnam Syndrome” in the Gulf, questions of the national purpose abounded in the wake of racial conflicts (like the Los Angeles riots in 1992) and as the multiracial and multi-ethnic character of the country rose. The campaign led by Gingrich exploited fears connected to multiculturalism as he imagined national regeneration through what he called American exceptionalism. Bringing this term into mainstream political discourse for the first time, he claimed:

We have to recognize that American exceptionalism is real, that American civilization is the most unique civilization in history, that we bring more people of more ethnic backgrounds together to pursue happiness with greater opportunity than any civilization in the world. And we just don’t say it anymore. Let me be candid. Haitians have more to learn from America than Americans have to learn from Haitians. The same is true of Bosnia.⁵⁶³

Despite invoking Haiti and Bosnia, the serious foreign policy issues of the day, Gingrich primarily addressed domestic rather than international issues by reiterating the superiority of American values. “Exceptionalism” – a term that he took from the political scientist Everett Carll Ladd who himself cited Lipset and Tocqueville⁵⁶⁴ – was simplified into a *political conviction*, a campaign tool that reinforced superiority and justified exclusions. Certainly, on the face of it, Gingrich’s vision was not a restrictive one about American values (he celebrated that people from different ethnic backgrounds came to the U.S.). Nevertheless, he declared that “we’re going to *teach* people to be American,” suggesting a paternalistic understanding of prescribing for others and even for Americans *themselves* what it meant to be an American or who could belong to the nation.⁵⁶⁵ In his quest against “social pathologies” that he deemed un-

⁵⁶³ Newt Gingrich campaign speech excerpted by *The New York Times*, November 2, 1994.

⁵⁶⁴ Everett Carll Ladd, *The American polity: the people and their government* (New York: Norton, 1987), pp. 71-74; Everett Carll Ladd, “Tocqueville Had It Right: America Is ‘Exceptional,’” *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 7, 1995, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1995/0407/07192.html>

⁵⁶⁵ For his part, Gingrich took teaching seriously as he organized a college course around the theme of American civilization, centered on his understanding of American exceptionalism. Although he defended the move as non-partisan by inviting Democrats to participate, its content was inseparable from the ongoing Republican campaign. Ironically, the course carried the seeds of his political fall because – after a long ethics investigation – the House reprimanded him for using a tax-exempt organization for political purposes. Gingrich resigned from the speakership after the moral fervor that culminated in the impeachment of Bill Clinton led to Republican losses in the 1998 midterm. On the ethics investigation, see: Bruce Chapman, “The Gingrich Case: At Most A Minor Failing,” *The Washington Post*, January 2, 1997, p. A17. On the course, see: Peter Applebome, “Educators Divided on Course by Gingrich,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 1995, p. A12. Information on

American, he believed that a prerequisite for regenerating American civilization was to “replace” – or, in fact, to dismantle – the welfare state in order to return to the “original” American ideals of individualism and self-reliance. Moreover, while not opposing immigration *per se*, he nonetheless supported denying welfare benefits to noncitizens, which paved the way for a stronger restrictionist backlash within the Republican Party.⁵⁶⁶ Therefore, Gingrich believed that social ills and adverse effects such as the “culture of poverty” were results of foreign elements to American civilization, justifying the defense of America from these “external threats” just as Campbell described in his theory.

Gingrich did not reject activism in foreign policy – in fact, earlier he spoke about a “mission across the world” in markedly universalistic terms⁵⁶⁷ – though, as speaker, he responded to popular sentiments by endorsing more limited foreign policy activities. However, a return to some “original” meaning of American uniqueness was also proposed by those making the case for exemplarism.

RESISTING THE IMPERIAL TEMPTATION: THE EXEMPLARIST CASE

As mentioned previously, exemplarists had long believed that “staying aloof” from power politics ensured America’s special qualities, and a deviation from this would result in the loss of its distinctiveness. The end of the Cold War resuscitated this tradition amid calls for a return to an “older,” or “original” form of exceptionalism. In their book released in the wake of the

the course is available in the report of Gingrich’s counsel in the ethics investigation (Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, *Report of Counsel for Respondent*, Congressional Records, January 21, 1997), and on *Youtube* videos from the course itself: <https://www.youtube.com/user/Texans4Newt/playlists>.

⁵⁶⁶ On Gingrich’s role in the immigration debates, see Zolberg, *A Nation By Design*, pp. 410-418.

⁵⁶⁷ “I believe we have a mission across the world. I do not agree with those who say that just because the Soviet empire has died, we can now come home and write on the wall that it’s all okay. I believe that we are the only hope the planet has for a model of living in safety, prosperity, and freedom, which should be the goals of all humans.” Newt Gingrich, “Renewing American Civilization,” *C-SPAN*, September 10, 1993. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?50261-1/renewing-american-civilization>

Gulf War, Tucker and Hendrickson urged against succumbing to the “imperial temptation” of the new unipolar international structure:

At bottom, the belief that the United States will not give in to the imperial temptation rests on the belief that we are different, that American power will not be misused, that we are exempt from the weaknesses and imperfections of human nature. The cruel and bitter irony is that, in thus celebrating our exceptionalism, we have forgotten some of the very elements of our political order that were intended to make us exceptional. Those elements consist of limits on the circumstances in which we might make war and self-imposed restrictions on the fulfillment of our mission that are now regarded as feeble and unbecoming the conduct of the world’s preeminent military power.⁵⁶⁸

Therefore, Tucker and Hendrickson aimed to re-interpret exceptionalism in a way to uncover its “true meaning” in order to advance a more constrained foreign policy agenda. Still, they did not propose the dismantling of alliances and the reinstatement of pre-World War II conditions, which, of course, would also have been impossible. Instead, they argued for a re-evaluation of the means that the U.S. used in pursuing its foreign policy ends, especially by scaling back foreign military involvements and by limiting the active propagation of American values, which, in any case, would only corrupt the national purpose. Citing John Quincy Adams, a major hero of the exemplarist tradition, they suggested that there was no need to go abroad “in search of monsters to destroy,” but rather the U.S. had “an obligation to teach by example” – a universalist proposition in the sense “that the philosophical assumptions underlying the institutions of civil freedom were in principle open to all humanity,” but not being a call to enforce unilaterally these very assumptions.⁵⁶⁹ Hendrickson claimed that “American reflections on mission and purpose did sometimes restrain, rather than abet, the more extravagant conceptions of providential history,” and this understanding of a self-restrained, anti-imperialist vision was echoed in Walter McDougall’s contrast between what he saw as the “Old” and “New Testaments” in American foreign-policy traditions.⁵⁷⁰ In an op-ed for *The*

⁵⁶⁸ Tucker and Hendrickson, *The Imperial Temptation*, p. 197.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 210. The argument was repeated in: David C. Hendrickson, “The Renovation of American Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 71(2) (Spring 1992), pp. 48-63.

⁵⁷⁰ David C. Hendrickson, Review of “Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right” by Anders Stephanson, *Foreign Affairs* 75(2) (Mar-Apr 1996), p. 151; McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, p. 5.

New York Times, he wrote that “American exceptionalism in foreign policy lies less in utopian dreams of a new diplomacy than in a fierce commitment to sovereign freedom from foreign corruption.”⁵⁷¹

However, an attempt to reclaim exceptionalism for a more restrained conduct of foreign policy eventually could not succeed for several reasons. First, there was a discrepancy between applying eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideology for the circumstances of the 1990s. Neither McDougall’s argument nor the one presented by Tucker and Hendrickson claimed that it was possible or desirable to withdraw completely from the world stage or to tear up alliances, but then it was not clear to what extent past principles could be a guide for facing new challenges. Sympathetic reviewers appreciated the historic lessons warning against U.S. attempts to remake the world. However, as Aaron Friedberg remarked, McDougall’s conclusions in the end only appeared to favor “a policy of inertia which seeks simply to preserve the status quo because it seems less risky than abandoning it.”⁵⁷² Second, the sharp distinction between an “old” and a “newer” tradition was contested too. Josef Joffe noted that what McDougall called “New Testament” “was not really an aberration, let alone an abomination” but, in fact, a continuation of the “Old Testament” traditions under conditions of increased American power. In his view, “there was more to American Exceptionalism than McDougall’s minimalist definition can accommodate,” and in a unipolar era, the United States could not “retract from the world because it is the world.”⁵⁷³ Third, by the late 1990s, exceptionalism in the foreign-policy discourse was so engrained discursively as an expression for the belief in the universal validity *and* applicability of American values – reinforced by even those, like Kissinger, who contested its content – that a re-interpretation was bound to fail

⁵⁷¹ Walter A. McDougall, “Foreign Monsters, False Alarms,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 1997, p. A25.

⁵⁷² Aaron Friedberg, “Zealpolitik,” review of “Promised Land, Crusader State” by Walter A. McDougall, *Commentary* (July 1997), p. 56.

⁵⁷³ Josef Joffe, “Doing Well by Doing Good,” *The National Interest* 50 (Winter 1997/98), pp. 75-82.

as American leadership and responsibility for a post-Cold War order was increasingly accepted. Even though Americans believed they could resist the imperial temptation thanks to their peculiar practice of hegemony, essentially a quasi-imperialist role was embraced, not the least because of the official visions outlined about order and exception.

“NEW WORLD ORDER” AND “INDISPENSABLE NATION”: UNIVERSALISM AND ACTIVISM

While – still as Reagan’s vice president – George H. W. Bush admitted himself that he had less interest in the “vision thing” in politics, in his presidential rhetoric, he relied on the same tools as his predecessor to emphasize that America’s mission was connected to certain values and ideals.⁵⁷⁴ Still, his cautious reactions during the fall of the Berlin Wall and amid the rapid changes of 1989 were widely criticized by those who wanted the United States to take a more pro-active role in fostering transformations around the world. The Gulf War provided Bush with an opportunity to outline his own vision for the post-Cold War international environment, which became famous by his articulation of a “new world order” in a series of speeches in the fall of 1990 and throughout 1991.⁵⁷⁵ What were the elements of this vision?

First, this was an order based on *shared norms and the rule of law*, a much thicker understanding of order than how it is understood, for example, in the works of Hedley Bull and closer to the liberal order described in the works of G. John Ikenberry.⁵⁷⁶ Indeed, with the Gulf crisis, Bush welcomed a “rare opportunity to move toward an historic period of cooperation,” which could usher in a new era “freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice,

⁵⁷⁴ See McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 131-134. The “vision thing” quote is originally from: Robert Ajemian, “Where Is the Real George Bush? The Vice President Must Now Step Out of Reagan’s Shadow,” *Time*, Jan. 26, 1987.

⁵⁷⁵ Usually it is Bush’s address to the joint session of Congress about the Gulf crisis which is regarded as “the” “new world order” speech (September 11, 1990), but he also outlined his agenda in an address to the UN General Assembly (October 1, 1990), and repeated it (in somewhat different form) in his 1991 State of the Union speech (January 29, 1991). *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/264415>; <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/264816>; <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/265956>. The analysis in the following two paragraphs draws on these addresses, as well as on the argument outlined in McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 155-159.

⁵⁷⁶ Bull, *The Anarchic Society*; Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*.

and more secure in the quest for peace.”⁵⁷⁷ While Bush originally remained elusive about practicalities such as how these principles would be enforced, he emphasized that he shared this commitment with Mikhail Gorbachev. This leads to the second element of the order: it was presented as a *multilateralist* vision, allowing the institutional structure of the UN system to fulfill its original function with the end of the Cold War. Moreover, this also raised the prospect of extending the Western alliance of collective security to global scale, making Bush’s “new world order” a continuation of the universalist ideas outlined by FDR and Truman. Third, and relatedly, Bush advanced an *open international system* by embracing a particular set of specifically liberal values as he envisioned “a world of open borders, open trade and, most importantly, open mind.”⁵⁷⁸ Moreover, a year later, following the success of the Gulf War and only a few months before the Soviet Union’s dissolution, Bush declared that he sought a “*Pax Universalis* built upon shared responsibilities and aspirations.”⁵⁷⁹ Thus, Bush’s “new world order” was grounded on the universal validity of the liberal values that many in the U.S. considered to be “American values,” undoubtedly representing a combination of activism and universalism.

However, it was more ambiguous in Bush’s statements what role the United States would play in this new order. While in front of the General Assembly, he declared that the U.S. was “committed to playing its part” within the UN system, but other remarks appeared to suggest a more distinguished role.⁵⁸⁰ Addressing a domestic audience in his 1991 *State of the Union*, he defined the new world order as one where “diverse nations are drawn together in common cause to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind,” but where these aspirations are fulfilled

⁵⁷⁷ Bush, “New World Order” speech, September 11, 1990.

⁵⁷⁸ Bush, UN General Assembly speech, October 1, 1990.

⁵⁷⁹ George H. W. Bush, Address to the 46th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 23, 1991. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/266506>

⁵⁸⁰ Bush, UN General Assembly speech, October 1, 1990.

under American leadership. When Bush stated that Americans “have a unique responsibility to do the hard work of freedom,” and they “know that there are times when we must step forward and accept our responsibility to lead the world away from the chaos of dictators,” he was indeed speaking in exceptionalist terms – without subscribing to notions of exceptionalism directly.⁵⁸¹ Although, at the UN, Bush claimed that the U.S. had “no intention of striving for a *Pax Americana*,” his *Pax Universalis* reflected American beliefs, also underlined by his own admission in his memoir that he was “prepared to deal with [the Gulf] crisis unilaterally if necessary.”⁵⁸² Eventually, the gap between universalist aims and particularist or even unilateralist solutions became more apparent in the new neoconservative vision, but it was already present earlier.⁵⁸³

Bill Clinton’s presidency continued the path outlined by Bush, maintaining the ambiguity caused by a multilateralist agenda while assuming a global leadership role. Although Clinton was originally elected for his promise to shift focus to domestic and economic issues, by the time of his re-election campaign, he changed course as he was criticized for responding hesitantly to events unfolding in Bosnia and Rwanda in the previous years. Thus, in 1996, Clinton – reportedly under Madeleine Albright’s suggestion – began to use the slogan “indispensable nation,” and in his second inauguration speech, he outlined an activist and universalist role by declaring that “where it can stand up for our values and interests around the world ... [the U.S.] Government should do more, not less.”⁵⁸⁴ Albright, as the new secretary

⁵⁸¹ Indeed, a *Newsweek* article regarded the address as the expression of “the faith in American exceptionalism” at the time. Bush, *State of the Union address*, January 29, 1991; Mark Whitaker, “A Wrinkle in the New World Order,” *Newsweek*, March 4, 1991, p. 51. See also: McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 156.

⁵⁸² Bush, *UN General Assembly Speech*, September 23, 1991. Bush quoted in: McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 144. Originally in: George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), p. 303.

⁵⁸³ Nevertheless, Krauthammer criticized Bush’s vision for too much relying on multilateral tools (what he considered “the isolationism of the internationalists”) and he proposed a “NWO II” centered on the “assertion of American interests and values in the world.” Charles Krauthammer, “The Lonely Superpower,” *The New Republic*, July 29, 1991, pp. 26-27.

⁵⁸⁴ McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 156, 162; Bill Clinton, *Second Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1997, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/224843>. Bush also called the U.S. “indispensable” in his 1991

of state, also announced that the “unique capabilities and unmatched power” of the United States made it “natural that others turn to us in times of emergency.”⁵⁸⁵ She, together with Richard Holbrooke, an early proponent of an internationalist version of exceptionalism, put into practice Clinton’s foreign policy principles as they made sure that the U.S. remained committed to European security through the expansion of NATO and an active involvement in the Balkans.

At a strategic level, Clinton’s foreign policy goals were summarized with the words *engagement* and *enlargement*, principles that also correspond to our notions of activism and universalism. Accordingly, the United States remained *engaged* in the international order by not choosing the path suggested by those advocating for withdrawal or a more exemplarist approach; whereas it was committed to *enlarge* the area of capitalist democracies and the reach of liberal values. To the dismay of realists and those neoconservatives who viewed the Cold War as an exceptional ideological contest, Clinton essentially declared that America was not indifferent to the domestic arrangements of other countries. This was also underscored by the rising popularity of democratic peace theory from which the importance of the domestic set-up with respect to external behavior was inferred.⁵⁸⁶ Although Clinton’s 1994 *National Security Strategy* stated that the U.S. was not planning a “democratic crusade,” concerns for democracy and human rights remained part of the agenda. In fact, they were deepened in the wake of genocide in Rwanda and the Balkans.⁵⁸⁷ A year later, Clinton already noted that the U.S. had “a special responsibility that goes along with being a great power,” while the 1997 *NSS* referred to America as “the only nation capable of providing the necessary leadership for an

State of the Union address, and as was shown earlier, this term already appeared in Kissinger’s and Brzezinski’s rhetoric in the 1970s. Brzezinski was a professor and mentor of Albright. See: Chapter 4, fn. 361.

⁵⁸⁵ Madeleine Albright, “Building a Bipartisan Foreign Policy,” Address delivered to Rice Memorial Center, Rice University, Houston, Texas, February 7, 1997. *Vital Speeches of the Day* 63 (13), April 15, 1997, p. 388.

⁵⁸⁶ On the transformation of democratic peace theory to public conventions and political convictions, see: Ish-Shalom, “Theory as a Hermeneutical Mechanism.” See also: Smith, *Why Wilson Matters*, pp. 191-196.

⁵⁸⁷ Bill Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (The White House, July 1994), p. 19.

international response to shared challenges.” Furthermore, it unequivocally declared that “[u]nderpinning that international leadership is the power of our democratic ideals and values,” thus justifying activism through the universal relevance of the American model, which was also supported by the claim that the spread of free markets and free institutions “enhances both [America’s] security and prosperity.”⁵⁸⁸

Both Bush’s understanding of “new world order” and Clinton’s “engagement and enlargement” were depictions of *order*: they did not merely articulate what the U.S. should do in its foreign policy but provided outlines for the organizing principles of the post-Cold War international system. Moreover, both visions were based on the universal relevance of American values and proposed an active U.S. involvement on these grounds. American foreign policy – despite the criticism it received – seemingly adopted the idea reflected in Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis about the irresistible advance of free markets and democratic institutions. Thus, the American-led order was more than simply about “hegemonic stability;”⁵⁸⁹ it was also designed to project America’s own peculiar values and domestic structure to the international sphere. Even from his admittedly geopolitical approach, Brzezinski wrote that “the very multinational and exceptional character of American society made it easier for America to universalize hegemony without letting it appear to be a strictly national one;” while Ruggie uncovered a “foundational myth,” a peculiar form of civic nationalism which was reflected in America’s external behavior.⁵⁹⁰ However, as the American presidents of the 1990s outlined a distinguished American status in the terms of “uniqueness,” “special responsibility,” “leadership,” and finally “indispensable nation,” these depictions also carried tensions between

⁵⁸⁸ Bill Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (The White House, February 1995), p. ii; Bill Clinton, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (The White House, May 1997), p. 6.

⁵⁸⁹ Hegemonic stability theory, of course, is most famously outlined in: Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁵⁹⁰ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 210; Ruggie, “The Past as Prologue,” p. 110. The connection between the domestic U.S. set-up and international order was, of course, already noted with respect to the post-war arrangements, see Chapter 3, fn. 245.

different U.S. role conceptions: one stemming from the principle of sovereign equality; another from membership in the great power concert as part of the UN system; and a third one as the unipole that alone is responsible for maintaining order. Even while emphasizing the *rules-based* character of the order, they were ready to act unilaterally and bend these rules toward American values and interests when deemed necessary: the intervention in Kosovo without UN mandate – though within the framework of NATO – foreshadowed what could happen when U.S. initiatives were not sanctioned by the international community. In the end, neither a simple “continuity” nor a “change” argument catches the complexity of the relationship between exception and order. While contradictions were already present in the 1990s, a new understanding of exceptionalism – advanced by a new generation of neoconservatives – hardened the “exception” and diluted the “rule” under George W. Bush’s presidency, to which we now turn.

Exceptionalism as Political Conviction: More American than Order

Those who argue for continuity in post-Cold War American foreign policy rightly point out that some of the ideas that hallmarked the policies of the George W. Bush administration in fact already appeared earlier, not the least because of the continuities in personnel between the two Bush presidencies. Indeed, Krauthammer’s vision of the unipolar moment reached policy-making circles in a 1992 draft of a new *Defense Planning Guidance* which stated that America’s “first objective is to prevent the reemergence of a rival,” whereas “the U.S. must show the leadership necessary to protect a new order that holds the promise of convincing potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive

posture to protect their legitimate interests.”⁵⁹¹ However, when the draft, prepared under the supervision of Under Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, was leaked to the press, the administration soon needed to backpedal. Amid the public controversy, the Pentagon softened the language of the document.⁵⁹² Nevertheless, the tone of the original draft foreshadowed the views of an emerging new generation of neoconservatives (like Wolfowitz himself) who came to occupy important positions in the younger Bush’s government.

These new neoconservatives played the role of the political entrepreneurs who transformed exceptionalism – together with other notions, e.g. the theory of democratic peace, as Ish-Shalom showed – from public convention to political conviction, in order to advance a particular agenda. Indeed, this was the program enshrined in Krauthammer’s “unipolar moment” vision, a quest for American primacy and an American-led order in the name of the simultaneous defense of American interests and universal values. Furthermore, in an ironic twist, “exceptionalism,” which was first coined among American Communists as a smear against “heretics” who did not believe in the universal applicability of Marxism, now came to be used in the exact opposite way: to stigmatize political opponents for *not being* exceptionalists and not believing in the unique qualities of the United States. Three steps can be identified within this transformation: first, in the 1990s, exceptionalism and similar ideas were employed to criticize a perceived “retreat from power;” second, from the presidential

⁵⁹¹ *Defense Planning Guidance*, FY 1994-1999, February 18, 1992 (draft), p. 2. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb245/doc03_full.pdf First published in: Patrick E. Tyler, “U.S. Strategy Plan Calls For Insuring No Rivals Develop,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 1992, pp. 1, 14, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/08/world/us-strategy-plan-calls-for-insuring-no-rivals-develop.html>. Although the document became known as the “Wolfowitz Doctrine,” Wolfowitz himself did not take part in the original formulations, but he was still responsible for its content. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Abram N. Shulsky and Zalmay Khalilzad were involved in the writing process, all assuming important roles later in the George W. Bush administration. See: “‘Prevent the Reemergence of a New Rival’: The Making of the Cheney Regional Defense Strategy, 1991-1992,” *The Nuclear Vault*, *The National Security Archive*, George Washington University. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb245/index.htm>

⁵⁹² The prevention of the “reemergence of a rival” was replaced with the goal of “no potential rival could quickly or easily gain a predominant military position.” National Security Council, *Defense Planning Guidance*, April 16, 1992 version, p. 3, declassified and available at: <https://www.archives.gov/files/declassification/iscap/pdf/2008-003-docs1-12.pdf>

campaign of 2000 onwards, the term was used as an electoral tool; third, with Bush in power, neocons and their allies could impact policies and contribute to a re-interpretation of the American order based on these ideas.

In the first step, the new neoconservative writers promoted a universalist and activist agenda, even though neoconservatism was originally closer to particularism. However, a new generation hallmarked by Irving Kristol's son William, as well as by Robert Kagan (whose father, Donald Kagan, is also a scholar with neoconservative views) argued for a more extensive interpretation of the American mission, taking issue with both the prudence of realists and the liberal internationalism of Bill Clinton. In a 1995 *Commentary* article, Kagan criticized what he saw as an inclination to "retreat from power," both by Clinton (who, he claimed, was "living off and depleting the inheritance left by his predecessors") and by the new Republican majority in Congress where even traditionally activist members such as John McCain and Newt Gingrich were skeptical about the use of power in Bosnia or Haiti.⁵⁹³ Kagan also disagreed with Kissinger's proposition that the U.S. should become merely "*primus inter pares*" and rather called on Republicans to "cease their flirtation with realism" and return to the "confidence and optimism" symbolized by Truman and Reagan.⁵⁹⁴

Kagan further elaborated his position in a manifesto-like article to *Foreign Affairs*, jointly written with William Kristol. In "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," Kagan and Kristol declared outright that the United States should aim for "benevolent global hegemony" since American military preponderance is "a good thing for America and the world" given that the U.S. had "a world role [that] is entirely different from that of other powers."⁵⁹⁵ Thus, what they

⁵⁹³ Robert Kagan, "A Retreat from Power," *Commentary* (July 1995), p. 20.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 25. See also: Joshua Muravchik, *The Imperative of American Leadership: A Challenge to Neo-Isolationism* (Washington DC: AEI Press, 1996).

⁵⁹⁵ William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 75(4) (Jul-Aug 1996), pp. 20; 26.

envisioned was a hegemonic order based on American principles and interests, following the traditions of Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan who “both inspired Americans to assume cheerfully the new international responsibilities that went with increased power and influence” and “[b]oth celebrated American exceptionalism.”⁵⁹⁶ Although they conceded that Clinton had “proved a better manager of foreign policy than many expected,” ultimately, they challenged Clintonian liberal internationalism in the sense that they believed that advancing *American* interests and *American* values needed to be prioritized over the commitments to a rules-based order.⁵⁹⁷ Of course, the presumption was that this order can be maintained exactly because of the universal validity of these values,⁵⁹⁸ but, in a fundamentally unilateral approach, they reinforced the already-existing elements of *exemptionalism* which became prevalent later under George W. Bush’s presidency. Moreover, Krauthammer went even further: he believed that “internationalism,” “legalism,” and “humanitarianism” were “flawed premises” in Clinton’s foreign policy as he claimed that interventions in places like Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo were mere distractions only used to underline America’s seemingly disinterested behavior. Instead, Krauthammer suggested that “real threats” and American interests should be the deciding factors of U.S. interventions, while he maintained the aim of upholding preponderant power and even hegemony.⁵⁹⁹ However, his position highlighted the problems with *American* becoming more important than *order* itself, also raising the question of how American hegemony could then be conceived as exceptional. Furthermore, it showed that “hegemony” is a poor guide to action – after all, Kristol and Kagan supported intervention in Kosovo, arguing that “vital interests” were at stake there too.⁶⁰⁰ “Foreign policy is not social work,”

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

⁵⁹⁸ See also Robert Kagan, “Democracies and Double Standards,” *Commentary* (August 1997), pp. 19-26, a clear rebuke of Kirkpatrick’s essay published on the same pages two decades earlier.

⁵⁹⁹ Charles Krauthammer, “A World Imagined,” *The New Republic*, March 15, 1999, pp. 22-25.

⁶⁰⁰ Robert Kagan and William Kristol, “Kosovo and the Republican Future,” *The Weekly Standard*, April 5, 1999.

Krauthammer stated, but he left unanswered the question of how, in that case, “benevolence” would enter into “hegemony.”⁶⁰¹

For the second step – a more direct intervention in the political process – these neoconservatives began to create their own institutions in the mid-1990s. While Joshua Muravchik exaggerated when he claimed that all three major foreign policy journals (*Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and *The National Interest*) were in favor of “reducing America’s role abroad;”⁶⁰² proponents of a more assertive foreign policy nevertheless wanted a publication more closely aligned with their views, hence they founded – within Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation media empire – *The Weekly Standard* with Bill Kristol assuming editorship. In 1997, Kristol and Kagan also established the think tank *Project for the New American Century* (PNAC) which proclaimed that U.S. foreign policy needs “to accept responsibility for America’s unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to [its] security, [its] prosperity, and [its] principles.”⁶⁰³ Among the signatories of the document, we can find intellectuals like Norman Podhoretz and Francis Fukuyama, as well as former officials such as Elliott Abrams, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld together with Wolfowitz, Libby and Khalilzad who were responsible for the controversial 1992 DPG. A year later, core members of PNAC wrote a letter to Clinton to promote regime change in Iraq.⁶⁰⁴ Timed for the 2000 presidential election campaign to advertise similar views, essentially the same group of authors contributed to a volume titled *Present Dangers* – edited by Kristol and Kagan, – unmistakably alluding to the two Cold War era incarnations of the Committee on the Present Danger.⁶⁰⁵ By

⁶⁰¹ Krauthammer, “A World Imagined,” p. 25.

⁶⁰² Muravchik, *The Imperative of American Leadership*, p. 14.

⁶⁰³ PNAC, *Statement of Principles*, June 3, 1997, <https://web.archive.org/web/20050205041635/http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm>.

⁶⁰⁴ Project for the New American Century, *Letter to President Clinton on Iraq*, January 26, 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131021171040/http://www.newamericancentury.org/iraqclintonletter.htm>.

⁶⁰⁵ *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in America’s Foreign and Defense Policy*, eds. Robert Kagan and William Kristol (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000).

the time the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court essentially declared George W. Bush winner over Al Gore by the slightest of margins, a coalition between new (and some old) neoconservatives and “assertive nationalists” like Cheney and Rumsfeld was ready to remake American foreign policy.⁶⁰⁶

Ironically, George W. Bush was not necessarily this group’s first choice for president; in fact, John McCain was the one who was seen as the “national greatness” candidate of the 2000 race whereas Bush barely addressed foreign policy issues.⁶⁰⁷ Following the advice of Condoleezza Rice – hardly a neoconservative herself, – Bush promoted a vision of a “distinctly American internationalism” in the campaign, based on “idealism without illusions;” suggesting a policy that combined strength and the assumption of responsibilities with modesty and humility in a way “that reflects the American character.”⁶⁰⁸ This was certainly universalism and activism but suggested a more cautious approach compared to the later form of the Bush Doctrine. Nevertheless, when Bush faced Al Gore in the general election, neoconservatives lined up to support him, also displaying exceptionalist terms in their endorsements. Marc Thiessen, who then served on the Republican staff of the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee and later became part of Bush’s speechwriting team, for example contrasted Bush’s “American exceptionalism” with Gore’s “liberal multilateralism” in an article to *The Weekly Standard*.⁶⁰⁹ Rejecting the attempt to label Bush’s worldview as isolationist, Thiessen emphasized that Bush’s “distinctly American internationalism” in fact was based on “old-fashioned

⁶⁰⁶ Ivo H. Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2005), pp. 14-15.

⁶⁰⁷ Beinart, *The Icarus Syndrome*, pp. 312-314.

⁶⁰⁸ George W. Bush, *A Distinctly American Internationalism*, address delivered at Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California, November 19, 1999, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/wspeech.htm>

⁶⁰⁹ Marc A. Thiessen, “The Candidates’ Foreign Policies: It’s Bush’s American exceptionalism versus Gore’s liberal multilateralism,” *The Weekly Standard*, June 12, 2000, p. 16.

exceptionalism,” thus, he appropriated the term as a slogan for the purpose of an electoral campaign.

The third step, of course, came with Bush’s electoral victory, which enabled neocons to impact policy-making on the premise of American exceptionalism. However, in office, Bush continued to champion his more modest vision, though already in strongly universalist terms.⁶¹⁰ In addition, Bush’s early decisions about withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol and from the ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court already reflected the exemptionalist inclinations of the new administration. Nevertheless, the turning point came with 9/11: the terrorist attacks not only changed Bush’s own views on the scope of America’s mission but also heightened the American public’s interest on foreign policy issues. The indifference of the 1990s evaporated: since the attacks were interpreted as an assault on the “American way of life,” the domestic and international sides of the exceptionalist discourse suddenly reconnected. In the new *National Security Strategy*, which became famous as the Bush Doctrine, the administration outlined a universalist objective (“a balance of power that favors human freedom”), and reinforced activism by dramatically expanding the justification for the use of force through the doctrine of preventive war.⁶¹¹ Even without finishing the mission in Afghanistan, attention turned to Iraq, admittedly not as a result of any major new development but because, in the post-9/11 world, the administration “saw the existing evidence in a new light.”⁶¹² Although different factions supported the war for different reasons, this was also an opportunity for neoconservatives to move their transformative vision on regional and global order into practice; their positions within the administration and their past advocacy for

⁶¹⁰ For example, in his inauguration speech, he praised America’s democratic faith as the “inborn hope of our humanity.” George W. Bush, *First Inaugural Address*, January 20, 2001, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/211268>.

⁶¹¹ George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (The White House, September 2002)

⁶¹² Donald Rumsfeld is quoted in: Alex Roberto Hybal and Justin Mathew Kaufman, *The Bush Administrations and Saddam Hussein: Deciding on Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 126.

action against Saddam clearly indicates a significant role in the policy-making. As Lawrence Kaplan and Bill Kristol stated, the strategy was “so clearly about more than Iraq... more even than the future of the Middle East,” but rather about “what sort of role the United States intends to play in the world in the twenty-first century.”⁶¹³

When weapons of mass destruction – the original rationale for the war, which was only put forward, according to Wolfowitz, as a “convenient explanation”⁶¹⁴ – were not found in Iraq, the administration further escalated its universalist rhetoric and Bush embraced the “freedom agenda” more pronouncedly. By his re-election campaign, supporters celebrated Bush as the candidate of American exceptionalism while John Kerry was ridiculed for his changing positions and his rejection of American uniqueness.⁶¹⁵ According to its critics, the administration “embrace[d] a brand of American exceptionalism that place[d] excessive confidence in the nobility and righteousness of American action,”⁶¹⁶ while neocons like Kristol refuted a liberal re-interpretation of exceptionalism.⁶¹⁷ In his second inauguration address, Bush mounted a fierce defense of the global mission to spread democracy. He stated that advancing liberty “is the mission that created [the American] nation.” Thus, it was now “the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in the world.” Although acknowledging that America’s influence is not unlimited, he claimed that it is

⁶¹³ Kaplan and Kristol are quoted in: Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*, p. 206.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., p. 156.

⁶¹⁵ Matthew Continetti, “John Kerry was always a dove – starting in college,” *The Weekly Standard*, Sept. 6, 2004.

⁶¹⁶ Ikenberry and Kupchan, “Liberal Realism,” p. 46.

⁶¹⁷ “What makes us exceptional is that we stand for liberty, and that we are willing to fight for liberty,” Bill Kristol stated in a response to Peter Beinart who suggested that American exceptionalism also demanded a recognition of America’s own immoral acts in Iraq and elsewhere. Peter Beinart, “Haditha,” *The Huffington Post*, June 1, 2006, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-beinart/haditha_b_21978.html; William Kristol, “Haditha Handwringing: The last thing we need in response to Haditha is hand-wringing liberalism,” *The Weekly Standard*, June 12, 2006, <https://www.weeklystandard.com/william-kristol/haditha-handwringing>. See also: William Kristol, “Morality in Foreign Policy,” *The Weekly Standard*, February 10, 2003, <https://www.weeklystandard.com/william-kristol/morality-in-foreign-policy>.

“considerable,” and it would “use it confidently in freedom’s cause.”⁶¹⁸ At the same time, Bush rejected the assumption that the U.S. was a “chosen nation.” He instead invoked God – similarly to his State of the Union address just before the Iraq war when he stated that “the liberty we prize is not America’s gift to the world, it is God’s gift to humanity.”⁶¹⁹

Religious invocations are, of course, nothing new in relation to America’s global mission.⁶²⁰ The novelty of the Bush Doctrine lay in the circumstances of the unquestionable hegemon justifying its international behavior on these grounds. The vision of exceptionalism was transplanted into policy. However, the agenda soon collapsed under its own inner contradictions and because of its lack of a clear conception of order. As Ikenberry and Kupchan already observed in 2004, the Bush team believed that “international order [was] a direct by-product of U.S. primacy,” which diverged considerably from earlier assumptions under the presidencies of the elder Bush and Clinton.⁶²¹ Later Ikenberry also noted that the administration’s “grand offer to the rest of the world,” that it “would serve as a unipolar provider of global security, but in return the world would be expected to treat the United States differently” was rejected partly because of the wide discrepancy between America’s “unipolar national security project and its conservative nationalist impulses.”⁶²² Therefore, universalism – described by a skeptical Samuel Huntington as “American nationalism and exceptionalism taken to the extreme”⁶²³ – and exception were in contradiction; moreover, a poor conception

⁶¹⁸ George W. Bush, *Second Inaugural Address*, January 20, 2005, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/214048>.

⁶¹⁹ George W. Bush, *State of the Union Address to the 108th Congress*, January 28, 2003, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/211931>

⁶²⁰ See, for example, Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*; Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*.

⁶²¹ Ikenberry and Kupchan, “Liberal Realism,” p. 39. See also: Stefan Halper, “Big Ideas, Big Problems,” *The National Interest*, no. 88, March/April 2007, pp. 92-96.

⁶²² Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, pp. 256; 269. Ian Clark also argues that under Bush, the U.S. lacked the intention to create rules. Clark, *Legitimacy in International Society*, pp. 234-235. See also an early take on the dangers of American “sovereignism”: Peter J. Spiro, “The New Sovereignists: American Exceptionalism and Its False Prophets” *Foreign Affairs* 79(6) (Nov/Dec 2000), pp. 9-15.

⁶²³ Samuel Huntington, “Dead Souls: The Denationalization of the American Elite,” *The National Interest*, no. 75, Spring 2004, p. 6. However, Huntington was already skeptical about the U.S. superpower role at the end of the Clinton presidency: Samuel Huntington, “The Lonely Superpower,” *Foreign Affairs* 78(2) (Mar/Apr 1999),

of power and a disregard for concerns over hegemony exacerbated the problems.⁶²⁴ Even though, in rhetoric, Bush adhered to the idea that “great powers share common values” to confront regional conflicts,⁶²⁵ in practice, the U.S. wanted to be the sole manager of order – even without a clear conception of it. Furthermore, his dichotomic view of right and wrong was unable to grasp the real-life nuances and ambiguities of the diplomatic process, while the rhetoric that contrasted the “just demands of the civilized world” with “outlaw regimes” could remind a global audience of past exclusionary practices.⁶²⁶ To sum up, the advancement of universalist aspirations relying on the virtues of a single nation made notions of “exception” and “exemption” inherently problematic.

Conclusion: Hubris and Identity Crisis – Exceptionalism in the Unipolar Era

The “end of the Cold War” triggered a crisis of American foreign-policy identity given that there was no consensus about the emerging structure of the international system. Despite proclamations of unipolarity, some observers saw a return to multipolarity, while others believed that with a diffusion of power and the rise of transnational interdependence, all these notions had lost meaning.⁶²⁷ On top of the international uncertainties, a precarious domestic situation reinforced anxieties, raising further questions about national identity and self-definition. This was reflected in the domestic side of exceptionalism, propagated by Newt

pp. 35-49. See also his much more particularist understanding of the American nation compared to his earlier writings on the “American Creed” in: Huntington, *Who Are We?*

⁶²⁴ Christian Reus-Smit, *American Power and World Order* (Cambridge; Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2004), pp. 45-68.

⁶²⁵ George W. Bush, *West Point Commencement Address*, June 1, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html>.

⁶²⁶ George W. Bush, *Remarks on the future of Iraq*, February 26, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030226-11.html>. See also: Gerrit Gong, *The Standard of “Civilization” in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); Gerry Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶²⁷ The Gulf War ushered in “not American dominance but a new era of international cooperation,” the editor of *Foreign Affairs* argued. William G. Hyland, “The Case for Pragmatism,” *Foreign Affairs* 72(1) (America and the World issue, 1991/92), p. 44.

Gingrich, who employed a civilizational discourse to combat what he saw as the detrimental effects of multiculturalism and “counterculture.” The result was an attempt to define who Americans *were* and who Americans *should be*: a production of identity with an openly declared aim to *teach* others *to be* proper American citizens domestically and to indoctrinate “American values” externally. While Gingrich also reflected a return to more particularist understandings of nationalism, the idea to prescribe *standards* of *Americanness* – or *universal* civilized behavior – was moved from the inner-looking discourse of the 1990s to the effort to transform world order under the George W. Bush presidency.

The chapter showed that while it is certainly true that, in important aspects, the younger Bush’s unilateralism was already present in the policies of his predecessors, in fact both George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton still outlined a vision of *order*, which was conspicuously absent – or laid out self-contradictorily – later. Meanwhile, the concept of exceptionalism was hardened into a specific understanding of foreign policy, with the help of those political entrepreneurs who first used it to stigmatize political opponents, then, having defeated alternative meanings, went on to impact policy-making once they reached power. However, under the burdens of two increasingly unpopular wars and an unfolding financial meltdown, the U.S. was in a crisis of identity once again by the time George W. Bush reached the final year of his presidency. This did not suppress discussions about exceptionalism. On the contrary, exceptionalism – not independently of the neoconservative political entrepreneurs’ work in the previous decade – proliferated in the political language in previously unseen ways as presidential and vice-presidential candidates competed in presenting themselves, in contrast with others, as believers of American exceptionalism.⁶²⁸ As a reminder of the racial undertones of America’s

⁶²⁸ Terry Eastland, “Mr. Compassionate Conservative,” *The Weekly Standard*, August 7, 2006, <https://www.weeklystandard.com/terry-eastland/mr-compassionate-conservative> (on Senator Sam Brownback’s run for the presidency); Roger Cohen, “Palin’s American Exception,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 25, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/25/opinion/25Cohen.html>.

particularistic discourses, publicists and opponents were also fascinated whether the first African American major party presidential nominee believed in the idea of exceptionalism.⁶²⁹ Barack Obama's response – a re-interpretation of American exceptionalism in the spirit of an approximation to the ideas enshrined in the foundational documents of the United States – was contested as well, but it signaled a clear move away from the Bush-era arrangements, already under strain as a result of *American* pre-eminence having become more important than its *liberal* nature or the *order* itself.

To sum up, this chapter has highlighted various layers of the transformation of the exceptionalist discourse during the post-Cold War era (see Figure 6). First, the changes of *the international structure* induced alterations within the other layers: the end of the Cold War triggered a reconsideration of America's foreign-policy role, while the 2001 terrorist attacks paved the way for both policy shifts (e.g. the Bush Doctrine) and a reaffirmation of national pride in which exceptionalist articulations could thrive. From this, second, the *foreign-policy* level initially represented discourses that reflected understandings about *both* American role and international order ("new world order," "indispensable nation") in a universalist-activist framework; however, the notion of order became less clear as exception took center-stage in the Bush administration's controversial international agenda. Third, in turn, this agenda was influenced by those neoconservatives who connected *the intellectual and foreign-policy elite* discourses with policy-making; at the same time, their arguments employed *ideational background beliefs* about American uniqueness while also using exceptionalism as a *political* tool against liberals in the course of electoral campaigns. The success of the neoconservative ideational entrepreneurs meant that the idea of exceptionalism was increasingly equated with

⁶²⁹ Roger Cohen, "Obama's American Idea," *The New York Times*, Dec. 10, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/10/opinion/10cohen.html>; Noemie Emery, "Evil Under the Sun: Barack Obama and American exceptionalism," *The Weekly Standard*, Nov. 3, 2008, <https://www.weeklystandard.com/noemie-emery/evil-under-the-sun>

their foreign-policy agenda. Nevertheless, it was also the source of criticism once these policies turned out to be inherently problematic.

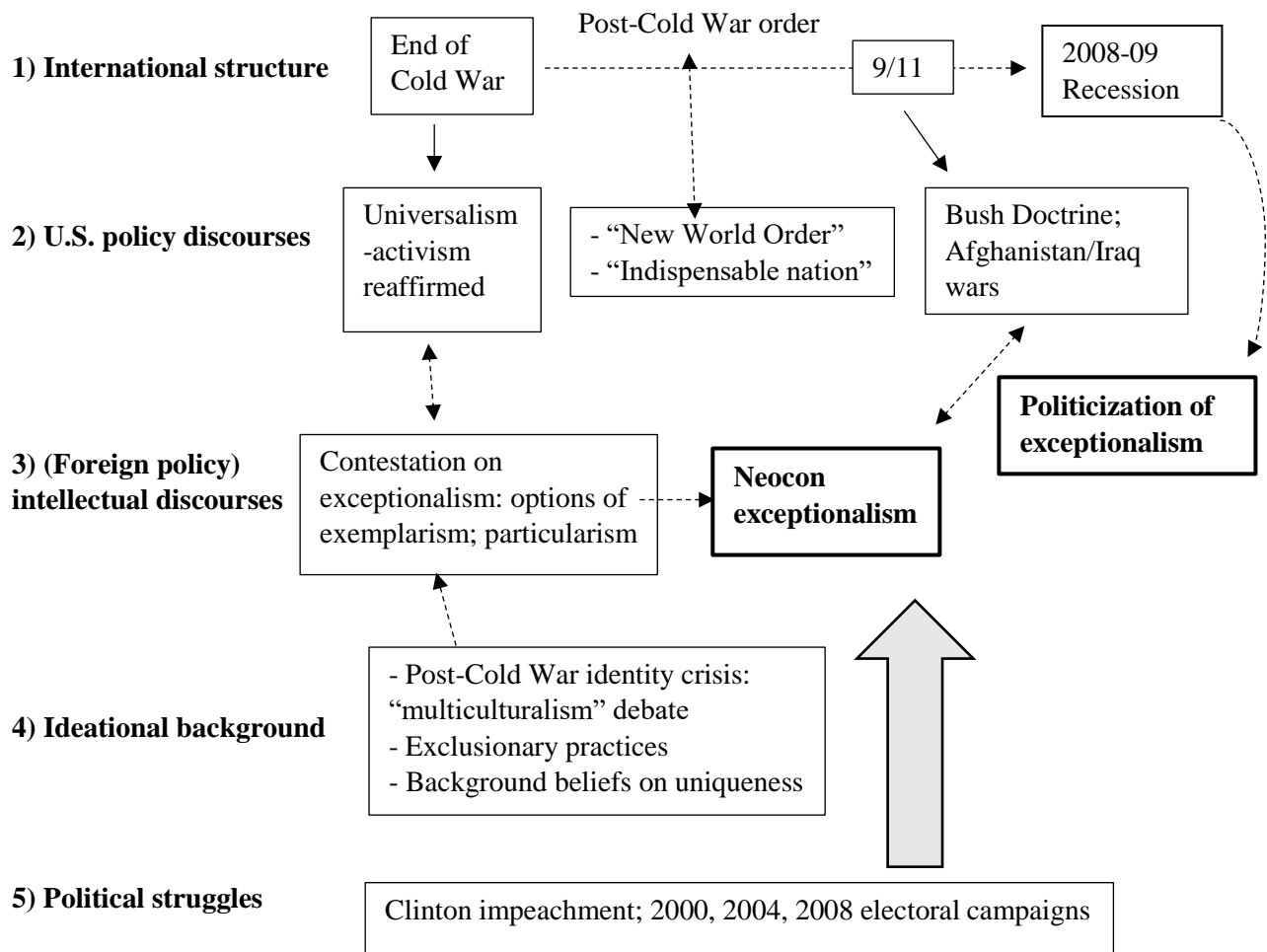


Figure 6. The discourse-tracing of American exceptionalism (1991-2008).

Not that there was no warning about the dangers of *hubris*: already in 1997, former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger argued that in the absence of “ruthless self-criticism,” America’s “exuberant enjoyment (and praise) of [its] own exceptionalism” can lead to its downfall.

Schlesinger wrote:

The constraints of our Constitution, the fragmentation of our body politic through “ethnic federalism,” the playing up to domestic constituencies while the general public’s gaze is focused elsewhere, the

increasingly indiscriminate use of sanctions, and the preachiness and general willfulness of American foreign policy all raise questions regarding the long-term sustainability of our leadership.⁶³⁰

Therefore, the peculiar American self-conception was a source of later problems, leading to the tension between universalist assumptions and particularist tools in foreign policy, or, as Stephanson noted, “the apparent paradox” lying in “a particular (and particularly powerful) nationalism constituting itself not only as prophetic but also universal.”⁶³¹ This hubris, eventually, became visible in the failure of the overly ambitious agenda of George W. Bush: the idea that merely by removing Saddam Hussein, the U.S. could foster the creation of a regional order based on human liberty proved to be a huge overestimation of America’s ability to elicit such transformations. The Conclusion of the dissertation will summarize the findings of the tracing of the exceptionalist discourse in its different incarnations by noting its changes and continuities; then, I will finish with an outline of how the discourse has progressed in the past decade under Barack Obama’s and Donald Trump’s presidencies.

⁶³⁰ James Schlesinger, “Fragmentation and Hubris: A Shaky Basis for American Leadership,” *The National Interest* 49 (Fall 1997), pp. 3-9; See also: Beinart, *The Icarus Syndrome*.

⁶³¹ Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, p. xiii.

Conclusion

This dissertation has uncovered how “American exceptionalism” was transformed from a marginal Communist discourse into a more mainstream understanding, first, for scholars and intellectuals, then, even for actors in politics. Throughout this process, the term has been endowed with new meanings as the nature of the exception moved from a limited recognition of the underdevelopment of socialism in the United States to the appreciation of America’s democratic tradition and to a certain conception of the U.S. foreign-policy role based on shared ideas of leadership and responsibility. At some points, the continued relevance of the exception was questioned. However, so far, it was always reinvigorated through some combination of the reinterpretation of the logic of the exception and the reassertion of fundamental beliefs connected to the American self-view. In all of its articulations, exceptionalism has reflected a tension between *particularism* and *universalism*: after all, this was the source of the contradiction between Marxist theories and American particularities; between those features of the post-WWII order that represented a compromise between universal principles and particular realities; and even between the different role conceptions arising under the conditions of unipolarity. Furthermore, as exceptionalism increasingly became connected to a self-understanding of the external role of the U.S., it displayed a swing between *activism* and *withdrawal*. Hence, we could locate discourses of exceptionalism in the context of these two dimensions of the analytical framework.

Nevertheless, these two dimensions do not give a full picture of the development of exceptionalism given that this matrix cannot on its own explain all the meanings connected to exception and rule, and it certainly cannot account for the shifts and transformations in these understandings. For this reason, I traced the discourse within multiple layers. In this way, instead of assigning a predetermined meaning to this notion, I could discern its content from

its usage, while paying attention to the various scholarly, intellectual, and political contexts where the term arose. Then, the evolution of exceptionalism cannot be conceived as a single linear process, but the emphasis is precisely on the interactions between these different contexts and discursive layers. In this Conclusion, I revisit my initial questions and highlight the contributions of the dissertation based on the findings of the chapters. From this, the Conclusion proceeds in three major parts. First, I outline how exceptionalism has *worked* in the timespan of the analysis within the different discursive layers. The main takeaway here is that various actors invoked exceptionalism in order to pursue intellectually and politically interwoven goals: they promoted their worldview and legitimized their policy positions while also stigmatizing their opponents in political power struggles. Second, I raise the question how my analysis can shed light on other problems than the development of the exceptionalist discourse in the United States. A self-evident future research line is to compare the American development of the discourse with the appearance of exceptionalism in other countries. In addition, I also point out how this *mode of the analysis* can be used for examining different objects. Third, the dissertation finishes with a glimpse at what has happened since 2008: a brief overview shows how, once again, the most recent crisis transformed the use of the exceptionalist frame.

How Exceptionalism Works: Layers of the Exceptionalist Discourse

My aim was to explore how “*American exceptionalism*” has been used since its first recorded appearance. In this sense, the analysis uncovered how exceptionalism has *worked* in different contexts and situations. This notion of how exceptionalism “works” can be understood in two ways: the structures of the discourse have delineated the available set of political articulations,

enframing and delimiting possible actions as well, while agents also *used* exceptionalism in order to advance particular political goals and to shape collective understandings of America's self-view and its relation to the world. Then, in this interpretation, exceptionalism does not have a "core meaning" that is a part of a coherent set of political beliefs; it is rather envisioned – following Skowronek's conception of political traditions – as a "common grammar" through which different political objectives are articulated and realized.⁶³² From this, a particular mode of analysis followed which paid attention to the various contexts in which exceptionalism has appeared. This approach has allowed me to observe the interaction between the layers and to highlight how the idea evolved from one context and meaning to another.

Without going into the details outlined in the chapters, Figure 7 provides the summary of this multilayered discourse-tracing. The appearances of the exceptionalist discourse are highlighted; however, the dashed lines between these should not be read as a single linear process between the different articulations. Instead, the focus is on the interactions with other layers, which paved the way for certain innovations to be accepted, while others could not succeed. Having established these, I can address the questions raised in the Introduction.

⁶³² Skowronek, "The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes," p. 400. See also the discussion in the Conclusion of Chapter 1.

1) International structure

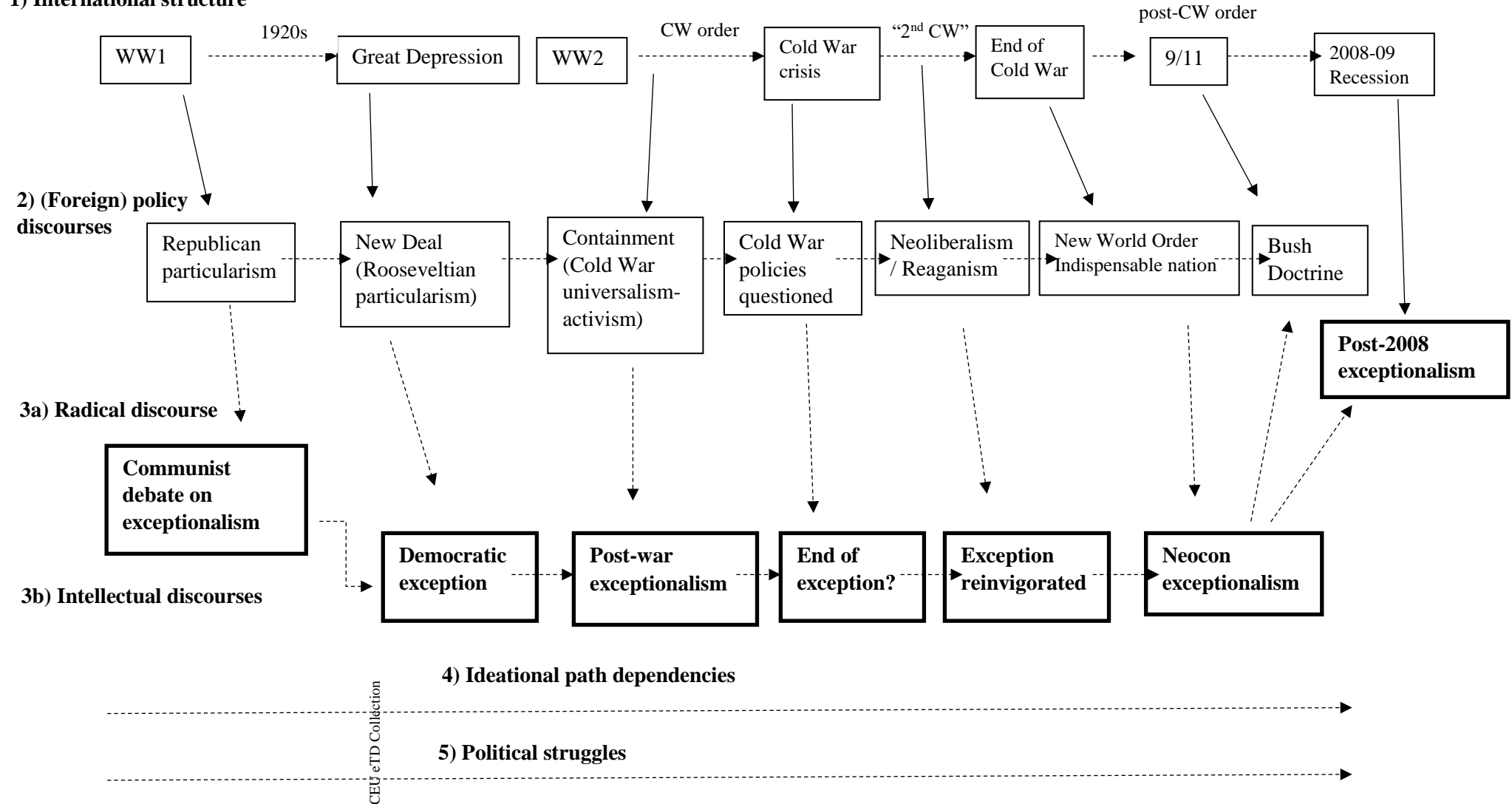


Figure 7. The multilayered discourse-tracing of American exceptionalism.

First, as Figure 7 shows, the *locations* of the contestations over exceptionalism were mostly intellectual debates. In the beginning, the term appeared in a specific radical discourse, while it later moved to scholarly discussions related to the absence of American socialism; to more general questions regarding American uniqueness; and, ultimately, to issues of foreign policy. In the later phase of the Cold War, exceptionalism appeared in the writings of foreign policy intellectuals, but it only gained its predominantly foreign policy understanding in the post-Cold War unipolar period. Even though, as was seen, *politics* has always been an important aspect of exceptionalism, the expression's *explicit* politicization happened relatively late in the process: political actors began to use it for the purpose of political – specifically, electoral – gains only in the post-Cold War period. Furthermore, as our discussion of the initial puzzle has shown, the direct political references have only proliferated in the aftermath of the 2008-09 crisis, which suggests a new turn in the discursive development. The confluence of distinct though interrelated factors – the questioning of the purpose of American foreign policy, the erosion of the unipolar order and anxieties over certain domestic dynamics in the United States – could have contributed to the intensification of the political use of exceptionalism, to which I return in the final section of this Conclusion.

Second, the *actors* were various groups of intellectuals, among them, radicals, writers, journalists, foreign policy intellectuals, and (later) policymakers and politicians themselves. They *did* various things by invoking exceptionalism: they used it to *stigmatize* opponents while setting boundaries between accepted members of a community or nation and outsiders; they *justified* America's exemptions and *legitimized* an understanding of order. Exceptionalism was invoked to *strengthen* and *reiterate* a civil religion; it was embraced to *reconcile* role strains stemming from different conceptions of America's role in the world; while its neoconservative entrepreneurs used it to *institutionalize* their positions and to *promote* a particular political agenda and understanding of order. My discourse-tracing uncovered how theoretical constructs

(the scholarly analyses of exceptionalism) were turned into *public conventions* and *political convictions*. However, the process is even more complicated in the sense that it is difficult to precisely delineate these different phases. Political concerns were interwoven with almost all articulations of exceptionalism and even scholars have had value-laden political agendas as they became preoccupied with the issue. Then, this analysis pointed out the back and forth movement of the idea between the spheres of politics, academics and the boundaries between these where intellectuals operated with the clear goal of influencing policy and politics. Nevertheless, exceptionalism has only become a mainstream *political slogan* from the presidency of George W. Bush, and especially during the Obama era, which represented a new level of the politicization of the concept.

Then, third, the term has entered politics in the contingent, multilayered process that has been detailed throughout the chapters. The layers outlined in this analysis were the *structure of international politics*; *(foreign) policy discourses*; *radical and intellectual discourses*; *ideational path dependencies*, and *political struggles*. Figure 7 shows the interactions between these layers with the important addition that the bottom two – ideational path dependencies and political contestations – continuously provided context to the articulations of exceptionalist arguments. On the level of the *international political-economic structure*, those historically significant events and periods were noted that triggered fundamental reconsiderations of the American self-view amid questioning settled ideas and beliefs. Compared to the timespan of the examined processes, these events can indeed sometimes be understood as “moments” – more in line with a stricter understanding of “critical junctures” – however, other cases like the Great Depression or the “crisis of the Cold War order” can be conceived as prolonged periods of unsettled times. The developments of the structural layer influenced the transformations on the level of *policy discourses*: for these, primarily, foreign policy discourses were considered here, but with a recognition that the domestic and the international is not entirely separable,

which justified a look at those discourses like trade and immigration that, by their nature, have both external and internal relevance. The chapters have described how the interpretations of major triggering events induced shifts (or, at least, raised the possibilities of shifts) along our two axes of withdrawal-activism and particularism-universalism. The second layer of Figure 7 summarizes the major movements between the different policy positions. While, originally, Roosevelt maintained the particularist-activist path outlined in the 1920s with his New Deal, by 1941, he also embraced universalism which became the major frame of action following the shocks of World War II and in the early Cold War period, instigating what is commonly described as the “containment” phase of U.S. foreign policy. The crisis of the Cold War order raised various alternatives to this dominant universalist-activist tradition amid the complexities and ambiguities arising by the 1970s. Nevertheless, following Reagan’s victory and the outbreak of the “second Cold War,” the earlier emphasis on activism and universalism was restored, and this was also maintained in the post-Cold War period even though the structural changes of the international system opened up the range of available options.

At the same time, these shifts and continuities themselves do not explain the turns of the exceptionalist discourse even though they establish the contexts in which understandings of exception and order have been outlined and contested. The formulation of exceptionalism took place on the level of *radical* and *intellectual discourses*, also influenced by those ideational path dependencies and ongoing political contestations that are noted in the bottom two layers. Nationalist, religious, racial, and gendered understandings of *background beliefs* could reproduce exclusionary and discriminatory practices, reinforcing the particularistic vision of the American nation while also influencing the terms under which America’s international roles were defined. On the other hand, universalistic conceptions of Marxist ideas or about America’s democratic tradition countered particularistic notions, while, in a new turn, neoliberal understandings of the universality of the forces of the market shaped discursive

structures with the beginning of the Reagan era.⁶³³ Finally, partisan debates, power struggles and electoral arguments often gave a *political* meaning to the articulations of exceptionalism – long before this term entered the language of mainstream politics.

Therefore, while this approach has stressed the ongoing processes of ideational path dependencies, it could also pinpoint to those *critical junctures* when established meanings were questioned and new meanings were created. Here, critical junctures can be conceived in two – interrelated – ways. First, certain events and the *interpretations* of these events are critical junctures themselves: Figure 7 shows those major turning points when the self-conceptions under examination have been substantially altered. Second, there were certain *agential innovations*, utterances and writings that succeeded in changing the discursive structures and created references for further exceptionalist articulations. However, the emphasis was on the *intersubjective* constitution of the discourse; hence, for these innovations to take hold, they needed to be reinforced through acceptance, re-articulation or even contestation. Then, these intersubjective constructions could easily diverge from the original intentions of the authors of exceptionalist contributions: as was highlighted in multiple chapters, Max Lerner’s *America as a Civilization* has been a constant reference point for subsequent articulations, but – even as authors continued to cite this particular work – its more realist content soon faded. Similarly, Daniel Bell’s thesis on the “end of American exceptionalism” was, ultimately, transformed into a reiteration of exceptionalist beliefs while ignoring his warnings about the ambiguities of the historical process. Although Bell himself also revisited his position as the Cold War was about to end, his subtle argument was lost amid the self-congratulatory celebrations of America’s so-called “unipolar moment.” At the same time, some reinterpretations could not succeed: indeed,

⁶³³ On the rapid proliferation of discourses centered on market forces, see: Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, pp. 41-76. It has to be noted that religious discourses could be used to reinforce both particularistic and universalistic conceptions; a closer analysis of the religious sources of the exceptionalist discourse was beyond the scope of this dissertation. For this, see: Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*; Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* and the other works cited in Chapter 4, fn. 398.

an attempt to emphasize the exemplarist side of exceptionalism was not picked up in the post-Cold War period and the missionary attitude was instead strengthened, partly due to the active efforts made by the new neoconservative political entrepreneurs. In turn, these efforts could be more fruitful due to the institutional embeddedness of these actors and because the ideational dominance of the universalist-activist worldview in which the new, politicized understandings of exceptionalism were outlined.

This leads to the final iteration of the exceptionalist discourse: the initial puzzle observed at the beginning of the dissertation. By the time of the 2008 elections and especially after Obama's election, exceptionalism became a conservative frame that served as a tool in electoral politics. But how has it come to be associated with foreign policy? As was seen, it was already mentioned in the context of the post-war order when Lerner published his work in the 1950s. Stanley Hoffmann posited that swings between "activism" and "quietism" represented different faces of what he described as exceptionalism, and following Bell's declaration on the "end of the exception," paradoxically, the term was picked up by foreign-policy writers in the late seventies and eighties. The Reagan era and the rising influence of neoconservatives was certainly a major impetus behind this. However, the association with foreign policy only became widespread in the post-Cold War period. While, according to our framework, domestic and foreign policies have always been intertwined, the structure of unipolarity added a new element to this interrelatedness. The "end of the Cold War" can indeed be seen as a "foreign policy identity crisis" for the United States, as established understandings of America's Cold War role became uncertain. This context of exceptionalism became more prevalent when, on the one hand, traditional American beliefs on a universal mission were reinforced; while, on the other hand, the *raison d'être* of this mission was, first, put in question in the post-Cold War environment, and, second, following the 2008-09 meltdown. This last point will be highlighted

at the end of the dissertation, but before doing that, possible generalizations and further paths for research will be considered briefly.

Generalizations and Future Research Lines

The analysis so far dealt exclusively with the transformations of the discourse of American exceptionalism. In this section, I argue that the extension of this framework can contribute to the examination of other – possibly more general – issues, which points toward future research lines. This extension can be understood in two ways: it can either refer to the idea of how the object of analysis, i.e. exceptionalism itself, can appear in different forms and in different contexts beyond what has been examined here, or it can mean whether *the way of the investigation* can shed light on other questions and problems. I consider both understandings below succinctly.

First, a self-evident – and so far, here, mostly neglected – issue is to raise the question whether other countries have similar discourses reflecting beliefs in *their* exceptional character. In recent years, there has been a rising interest in the Chinese, Indian, and Turkish versions of exceptionalism, implying that American exceptionalism is, in fact, not that exceptional in the world.⁶³⁴ While the starting point was, of course, the American usage of the term, these contributions aim to generalize the idea by noting the similarities and differences between its various occurrences. Kal Holsti understands exceptionalism as a *type* of foreign policy: a “*rare* form of behavior,” which, nevertheless, is not unique to the United States.⁶³⁵ Nymalm and

⁶³⁴ Feng Zhang, “The rise of Chinese exceptionalism in international relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19(2) (Jun. 2013), pp. 305-328; Kate Sullivan, “Exceptionalism in Indian Diplomacy: The Origins of India’s Moral Leadership Aspirations,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 37(4) (2014), pp. 640-655; Nymalm and Plagemann, “Comparative Exceptionalism.”

⁶³⁵ Holsti, “Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy,” p. 384. (Emphasis in original.)

Plagemann have recently suggested a two-dimensional framework subsuming different forms of exceptionalist foreign policy discourses; along the two axes of variation between missionary-exemplary and exemptionalist-nonexemptionalist characters, they identify four major types – *civilizational*, *imperialist*, *globalist*, and *internationalist* exceptionalisms – and classify Chinese, Indian, Turkish and U.S. discourses according to these categories.⁶³⁶ A comparative approach was beyond the scope of this dissertation; however, the framework of my analysis can add to the understanding of how the concept works in various contexts. While the distinct discursive layers necessarily arise in different ways in different parts of the world, a focus on the scholarly and intellectual usage can be supplementary to existing analyses that mostly emphasize how officials and the political leadership of these countries produce and reproduce exceptionalist narratives that contribute to the construction of foreign policy identity. Moreover, the way I put forward my analysis highlighted that the distinction between primary and secondary sources is often somewhat arbitrary; for this reason, this type of investigation can allow a more reflexive approach about the role of foreign-policy analysts and theoreticians of International Relations themselves. In this sense, it is also an important question why observers of international politics have begun to compare such narratives (and calling them “exceptionalisms”) at this particular point of history.

This leads us to the second main avenue of generalizations, related to the issue of how the methods and the framework outlined here can be useful for the examination of other objects of analysis. Of course, the idea to trace the development of a certain concept or term is not new at all; the Introduction noted some of the sources that motivated the formulation of the analytical framework here. Still, my understanding of how exceptionalism “works” in two ways – both as a structure that delimits what can be said in what terms, and as the conscious actions of agents who attempt to achieve political goals by transforming and reinterpreting the

⁶³⁶ Nymalm and Plagemann, “Comparative Exceptionalism,” p. 30.

notion – can add important perspectives to specific research projects. This type of analysis can emphasize both long-term transformations and individual interventions and innovations, which can enable us to pay attention to those interactions between theory and practice, intellectual reasoning and political persuasion, that set certain discursive trajectories.

Indeed, a major takeaway of this analysis is that the line between scholarly analysis and interested political positioning can be very thin. Therefore, this pattern of argument can shed light on developments of discourses that are similarly located on the boundary between politics and intellectual engagements. The evolution of the understanding of “isolationism” in American foreign policy can provide a further example where this type of analysis can be fruitful: as was pointed out earlier, this is also a heavily contested concept among both scholars and practitioners, and – not unlike the birth of exceptionalism – it was originally used as an insinuation by political opponents directed at those who self-declaredly opposed “foreign entanglements.” Nevertheless, some accepted this category and used isolationism self-referentially, whereas it also became a (debated) term among scholars.⁶³⁷ In addition, recent discussions on the notion of “political correctness” can be supplemented with an examination in a similar fashion. While it is common knowledge that this idea is now used by right-wing pundits and politicians to disparage leftist and liberal positions, it is less known that the “phrase came into more widespread use in American leftist circles in the 1960s and 1970s,” showing another analogy to the development of exceptionalism.⁶³⁸ In this case, it was a speech from Mao, not Stalin, which contributed to the propagation of the term, which was turned into an ironical “critique of excessive orthodoxy,” while it was later appropriated by the right to advance a particular anti-liberal agenda. The investigation of these terms can be enriched by

⁶³⁷ Braumoeller, “The Myth of American Isolationism;” Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, pp. 140-141. See also: Chapter 2, fn. 184.

⁶³⁸ Moira Weigel, “Political correctness: how the right invented a phantom enemy,” *The Guardian*, November 30, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/30/political-correctness-how-the-right-invented-phantom-enemy-donald-trump>.

an analysis that takes into account the various layers of such discourses and pays attention to both how the structure sets constraints on the use of language and how agents utilize these formulations for their objectives. Just as in the case of exceptionalism, these do not need to become self-serving exercises: they can also help us to understand the social-political contexts in which important contestations happen and long-lasting decisions are made.

These two examples, “isolationism” and “political correctness,” also became important points of contestation in the past decade of American politics, when established meanings about U.S. domestic and foreign policies were, once again, in flux as a result of the Great Recession. In fact, the erosion of the foundations of the post-Cold War order paved the way for a reconsideration of America’s foreign-policy role, and when arguments for self-constraint were made, accusations of “isolationism” proliferated once again.⁶³⁹ Meanwhile, Donald Trump reached the presidency with his self-declared fight against “political correctness,” using this category in a similar fashion to how previous Republican candidates referred to Obama’s “lack of belief in exceptionalism.” At the same time, an obvious generalization of the argument would be to simply extend the timespan of the investigation beyond the period that has been examined here. However, Trump’s rise may suggest that an important era in the development of American exceptionalism is perhaps already over: after all, Trump himself rarely acknowledges this notion, which raises the question how the most recent crises have shaped the formulation of the exceptionalist discourse.

⁶³⁹ Isolationism is, most often, mentioned in connection with the foreign-policy line represented by Senator Rand Paul. But even Paul does not call himself an isolationist. Rand Paul, “I Am Not an Isolationist,” *Time*, September 4, 2014, <http://time.com/3268581/rand-paul-i-am-not-an-isolationist/>. In 2016, Josef Joffe called Obama an “isolationist with drones and special-operation forces.” Josef Joffe, “Obama Is Not a Realist,” *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/obama-doctrine-goldberg-realist-isolationist/473205/>.

At the beginning of the Introduction, we saw how exceptionalism was picked up in the political discourse around the time of Barack Obama's election to the presidency, and how Republicans particularly attacked Obama for his take on exceptionalism as presented in his Strasbourg response. Obama's redefinition of an "imperfect" exceptionalism happened in a time when the omnipotence of American power was cast in doubt and the superiority (or even the viability) of the American model was questioned. Amid the rising burdens of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and following the collapse of the structures of international finance, the case was increasingly made for a more restrained international posture, and public opinion also seemed to shift toward favoring some sort of withdrawal.⁶⁴⁰ In his speech after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Obama outlined a restrained and ambiguous leadership role. Although he did not reject the relevance of universal values, in a truly Niebuhrian fashion, he invoked the "imperfections of men and the limits of reason" to articulate his skepticism about large transformative projects. This was still a position of universalism and activism, but his activism recognized limits as he embraced – by quoting John F. Kennedy – the "gradual evolution of human institutions."⁶⁴¹

⁶⁴⁰ Interestingly, Barry Posen already made the case for restraint before the unfolding of the 2008-09 crisis: Barry R. Posen, "The Case for Restraint," *The American Interest* (Nov/Dec 2007), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2007/11/01/the-case-for-restraint/>. For a summary of these debates – and a case for continued engagement – see: Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home America: The Case Against Retrenchment," *International Security* 37(3) (Winter 2012/13), pp. 7-51. See also: Robert Kagan, "Not Fade Away: The Myth of American Decline," *The New Republic*, January 11, 2012, <https://newrepublic.com/article/99521/america-world-power-declinism>. In public opinion, the support for "staying out" of international affairs had reached a record high of 41% by 2014 (though still 58% favored an "active part") according to the *Chicago Council Survey*. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *2014 Chicago Council Survey: Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment*, <http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/survey/2014/chapter1.html>.

⁶⁴¹ Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize*, December 10, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>.

Obama's "imperfect exceptionalism" was also reflected in his responses to domestic, especially racial, upheavals. Once again showing the interrelated nature of domestic and international issues, he referred to the racial tensions in Ferguson, Missouri in a 2014 speech in front of the United Nations General Assembly while defending what one reviewer saw as his vision of an "imperfect and still exceptional America."⁶⁴² Although Republican critics accused him of not believing in exceptionalism, ironically, he used the term more than any of his predecessors.⁶⁴³ Moreover, his understanding was arguably more in line with some of the themes discussed in the preceding chapters than that of his political opponents: besides his widely-documented allusions to Niebuhr's ideas, his interpretation of exceptionalism may remind us of Corey's emphasis on *responsibility*, of Lerner's *realist* conception of a rules-based order, of Bell's appreciation of the *complexity of the historical process*, and of Huntington's take on the *gap between ideals and institutions*.⁶⁴⁴ Nevertheless, as was shown previously, these conceptions themselves were challenged and transformed; by the time Obama came into office, exceptionalism became a conservative construction which hindered the acceptance of his own

⁶⁴² Chris Cilizza, "President Obama's vision of an imperfect and still exceptional America," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/09/24/president-obamas-vision-of-an-imperfect-and-still-exceptional-america/?utm_term=.6c1beb9983bd. The speech itself (unlike many other Obama speeches) did not contain the words "exceptional" nor "exceptionalism." Barack Obama, *Address to the United Nations General Assembly*, September 24, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

⁶⁴³ Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 232.

⁶⁴⁴ Obama himself once called Niebuhr one of his "favorite philosophers" and much has been written on Niebuhr's influence on Obama, especially following his Oslo speech. David Brooks, "Obama, Gospel and Verse," *The New York Times*, April 26, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/26/opinion/26brooks.html>; David Brooks, "Obama's Christian Realism," *The New York Times*, Dec. 14, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/15/opinion/15brooks.html>; Liam Julian, "Niebuhr and Obama," *Policy Review* 154 (Apr/May 2009), pp. 19-33; Jeremi Suri, "Liberal Internationalism, Law, and the First African American President" in: Julian E. Zelizer, ed., *The Presidency of Barack Obama: A First Historical Assessment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 197. Ben Rhodes, the main speechwriter of Obama's Oslo address, also confirmed in his memoir that reading Niebuhr's works influenced the writing process. Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: Inside the Obama White House* (London: Bodley Head, 2018), pp. 80-81. There is less written on Obama's connection to the other authors listed here, though in another article, David Brooks also noted that "Obama aims to realize the end-of-ideology politics that Daniel Bell and others glimpsed in the early 1960s." David Brooks, "The Politics of Cohesion," *The New York Times*, Jan. 19, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/opinion/20brooks.html>. That year, the ninety-year-old Bell himself celebrated that "a world-class African-American citizen sits in the White House" as he highlighted the significance of it by contrasting with experiences from several decades before. Daniel Bell, "Thinking Aloud: Washington, D.C. Then and Now," *The New Leader* (January/February 2009), p. 5.

framing of the term. Moreover, given the domestic and international context, his presidency, to a large extent, had to engage in crisis management as he advanced a corrective reaction to the external overexpansion of the Bush years, which also made him vulnerable to attacks about his supposed preference for “retrenchment” even though he wanted to maintain America’s leadership role.

To the dismay of Obama himself, a large amount of his energy was consumed by the inherited involvement in the broader Middle East, where the tumultuous events of the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS demanded novel responses. Whereas he articulated American actions in exceptionalist terms, he was, in the end, caught in the middle between those who criticized him for not being “exceptionalist enough” and those who opposed U.S. activism. When NATO intervened in Libya, Obama – in front of a domestic audience – justified his decision by emphasizing the multilateral nature of the endeavor, though he also stressed that the United States was “different” as it could not “brush aside America’s responsibilities as a leader” and its more universal “responsibilities to our fellow human beings.” Transforming this issue once again to a question of identity, he asserted that “turn[ing] a blind eye to atrocities in other countries” would have been a “betrayal of who [Americans] are.”⁶⁴⁵ Still, Republicans vigorously criticized the assumed weakness behind the U.S. response. The notion that the United States was “leading from behind” – originated by an anonymous administration source quoted in a *New Yorker* article – was ridiculed and repudiated. In the 2012 Republican convention, John McCain connected exceptionalism to the idea that the U.S. had always “led from the front, never from behind.”⁶⁴⁶

⁶⁴⁵ Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya*, March 28, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>.

⁶⁴⁶ Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist,” *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>; John McCain, “2012 RNC Speech,” *Politico*, Aug. 29, 2012, <https://www.politico.com/story/2012/08/john-mccain-rnc-speech-transcript-080399>.

The administration's response to events in Syria raised even more controversy: when Assad's regime broke Obama's previously-set "red line" by using chemical weapons, the United States threatened to retaliate with limited air strikes. In a televised address, the president argued that "basic rules were violated, along with our sense of common humanity," which provided a justification for action, but, at the same time, signaled a more minimalist conception of order than the ones advocated at the height of America's "unipolar moment." Nevertheless, while he reiterated that "America is not the world's policeman," Obama claimed that the "burdens of leadership" made the U.S. "different" and "exceptional."⁶⁴⁷ In an unprecedented move, Vladimir Putin responded to Obama's speech with an op-ed for *The New York Times* in which he did not only advise the U.S. against the air strikes, but also, against exceptionalist rhetoric more generally as he declared that "[i]t is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation."⁶⁴⁸ This certainly represented a new level in the history of American exceptionalism: for the first time, it entered the language of *international* politics, though we can also note the irony that eight decades before Putin's article, Stalin had already used the same term in a similarly negative fashion. In the end, no intervention was carried out following a diplomatic initiative from Russia; the Syrian civil war, of course, went on for several more years. While Obama once more – amid putting together a coalition to fight ISIS – claimed that "leading ... with the example of our values" made the United States exceptional, he showed no regret of not enforcing his "red line."⁶⁴⁹ In a 2016 interview, he criticized what he saw as the conventional "Washington playbook":

There's a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It's a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these

⁶⁴⁷ Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Syria*. September 10, 2013. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address-nation-syria>

⁶⁴⁸ Vladimir V. Putin, "A Plea for Caution from Russia," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html>.

⁶⁴⁹ Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address*, January 20, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-January-20-2015>.

responses tend to be militarized responses. Where America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions. In the midst of an international challenge like Syria, you get judged harshly if you don't follow the playbook, even if there are good reasons why it does not apply.⁶⁵⁰

In the end, the so-called “Obama doctrine” was based on a conception of exceptionalism that moved toward the exemplarist side of our framework. This was undoubtedly a response to those structural changes which appeared with the crisis of the post-Cold War order. By the time of the 2016 presidential election, this order was challenged in economic, political, and military terms, while its domestic popular support had also eroded. From this point of view, Hillary Clinton certainly was not the ideal candidate as she personally symbolized, as former First Lady and Secretary of State, much of the old universalist-activist consensus. In addition, Clinton had a more hawkish reputation than Obama, which did not help her case either in the Democratic primaries or among a more war-weary public in the general election.⁶⁵¹ Even in the context of our hundred-year overview, it is rare how sharp the contrast was between the two major candidates of the 2016 elections: Clinton, representing the continuities of the post-Cold War order, faced Donald Trump who diverged from the Republican orthodoxies dominated by neoconservative views in the previous decades. While it is almost self-evident to put Clinton into the universalism-activism quadrant of our framework, it is more difficult to locate Trump – his statements often changed significantly, without ever admitting the shifts in his position.⁶⁵² Nevertheless, in the campaign, he presented himself as an opponent of lengthy foreign military involvements as he suggested withdrawals from Syria and Afghanistan, though, on other occasions, he also embraced muscular – unilateralist – foreign policy

⁶⁵⁰ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic* (April 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

⁶⁵¹ Mark Landler, “How Hillary Clinton Became a Hawk,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 21, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/24/magazine/how-hillary-clinton-became-a-hawk.html>.

⁶⁵² See, for example, Zack Beauchamp and German Lopez, “Donald Trump just lied about opposing the Iraq war before it was started. Here is proof,” *Vox*, October 19, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/2/18/11057968/donald-trump-iraq-war-2002>.

solutions.⁶⁵³ In one sense he was consistent though: Trump continuously promoted particularistic visions regarding policies in trade and immigration, often exploiting attitudes of xenophobia or racial and gendered prejudice. His “America First” slogan alluded to the name of the WWII-era *America First Committee*, which again reinforces the conclusion that his rhetoric amounted to a – particularly vile – revival of particularism.⁶⁵⁴

In April 2015, before announcing his run for the presidency, Donald Trump was also asked whether he adhered to the notion of American exceptionalism. In his response, Trump said that he had “never liked the term” as he would rather “take everything back from the world that we’ve given them.”⁶⁵⁵ Indeed, as a candidate and later president, he has rarely used the expression in his major speeches.⁶⁵⁶ Of course, his rhetoric is famously built on a notion of “greatness” of America: in fact, he connects it to a mythical past, appealing to those having nostalgia about the racial and gendered undertones of once-existing (and possibly eroding) ascriptive hierarchies. But at the heart of it, Trump’s understanding is also deeply anti-exceptional as he denies some of those norms and qualities that – according to the proponents of the idea – made America exceptional in the first place. When he embraces autocrats or responds to criticism of his connections to Putin with the remark that the U.S. is not “innocent”

⁶⁵³ Most famously, he promised to “bomb the shit out of ISIS.” Tim Hains, “Trump’s Updated ISIS Plan: ‘Bomb the Shit out of Them,’ Send in Exxon to Rebuild,” *RealClearPolitics*, Nov. 13, 2015, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2015/11/13/trumps_updated_isis_plan_bomb_the_shit_out_of_them_send_exxon_in_to_rebuild.html. See also: Michael Tesler, “Trump’s base did not elect him to withdraw troops from Syria and Afghanistan,” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/01/04/no-trumps-base-did-not-elect-him-to-withdraw-troops-from-syria-and-afghanistan/>.

⁶⁵⁴ See also: Churchwell, *Behold, America*, “Epilogue 1945-2017: Still America Firsting.”

⁶⁵⁵ David Corn, “Donald Trump Says He Doesn’t Believe in ‘American Exceptionalism,’” *Mother Jones*, June 7, 2016, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/06/donald-trump-american-exceptionalism/>. I thank Hilde Restad for drawing my attention to this quote.

⁶⁵⁶ Based on a search in *The American Presidency Project* database. In an August 2016 campaign event, Trump spoke about Americans having an “exceptional country” and an “exceptional way of life” but this did not become a regular feature of his stump speeches. Donald Trump, *Remarks at Youngstown State University in Youngstown, Ohio*, August 15, 2016, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-youngstown-state-university-youngstown-ohio>. Neither has he come to embrace the term as president. Actually, he has not used “exceptional” in this sense in any of his speeches since January 2017. The closest result we can find is a presidential proclamation recognizing the works of public servants, clearly not written by the president himself. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-9607-public-service-recognition-week-2017>

either and Americans also “have a lot of killers,” he – ironically – makes exactly the type of moral equivalency of which Obama was accused after his Strasbourg answer.⁶⁵⁷ Of course, in the same response, Obama went on to emphasize unique values and achievements as the basis for American leadership, which is completely absent in Trump’s case. Nevertheless, the same Republican critics are more silent about the current president’s lack of appreciation of exceptionalism.

The jury is still out as to what extent Trump’s presidency constitutes a shift in actual *policies*. In some areas, he deferred to his more traditional advisers despite his initial instincts: in two crucial conflicts of the world, U.S. Special Representatives – Zalmay Khalilzad for Afghanistan and Elliott Abrams for Venezuela – are in fact neoconservative veterans from the Reagan and both Bush administrations, past advocates of a forceful universalist-activist version of exceptionalism. This would support the notion that despite some superficial differences, Trump’s actions are barely distinguishable from what any Republican president would do. However, the whole presupposition of this dissertation was that those “superficial differences” *can* matter, and at a discursive level, Trump is certainly *doing* things that were unimaginable just a few years ago. He significantly altered the rhetorical frames of U.S. foreign policy, and his open embrace of particularism, without even pretending that the United States has a universal message for the world; his transactional understanding of anything related to politics, and his disregard for norms and values, shattered a conception of order that was widely shared, even if its specific content was continuously contested. In his resignation letter, Defense Secretary James Mattis remarkably summarized how the Trump presidency undermined the idea that America’s “strength as a nation is inextricably linked to the strength of [its] unique

⁶⁵⁷ Abby Phillip, “O’Reilly told Trump that Putin is a killer. Trump’s reply: ‘You think our country is so innocent?’” *The Washington Post*, February 4, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/02/04/oreilly-told-trump-that-putin-is-a-killer-trumps-reply-you-think-our-countrys-so-innocent/>.

and comprehensive system of alliances and partnerships.”⁶⁵⁸ In Mattis’s view, Trump threatens the advancement of “an international order that is most conducive to our security, prosperity and values.” Obama’s Strasbourg response, cited at the very beginning of this dissertation, was based on precisely such a vision of order. However, under Trump, it seems that order – and, therefore, exception – is rapidly losing its meaning.

At the same time, the reader of these pages may find some of the current discourses familiar, based on this overview of a hundred years of history. Are things coming to a full circle then? In some ways, one can argue that the starting point of the analysis is surprisingly relevant: although it is Wilson who is believed to have said that he was “playing for 100 years hence,” particularism was soon to be on the rise, following his defeat in the “treaty fight.”⁶⁵⁹ After all, the current discourses on trade and immigration can remind us of the long-forgotten Republican policies of the 1920s, while – in a truly unexpected turn – “socialism” has become an increasingly accepted, or even popular notion (certainly among young people) for the first time in decades. Does it mean that “exceptionalism” will return on the left? Or, will the “absence of socialism” finally cease to become the source of the exception? It is hard to say at this point, and – obviously – the past does not need to repeat itself, especially given that discourses themselves also carry historical lessons. Nevertheless, this is certainly a period in which settled meanings and understandings are questioned and new ideas can arise on the social-political development of the United States, or about America’s role in the world. Indeed, there is already much thinking under way – especially among Democrats – to define a new foreign policy for a post-Trump era, whenever it comes.⁶⁶⁰ This, of course, does not tell us whether “American

⁶⁵⁸ “Read Jim Mattis’s Letter to Trump: Full Text,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/us/politics/letter-jim-mattis-trump.html>.

⁶⁵⁹ Quoted in: Thomas J. Knock, “Playing for a Hundred Years Hence” in: *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-first Century*, eds. G. John Ikenberry, Thomas J. Knock, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Tony Smith (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 30.

⁶⁶⁰ See, for example, Peter Beinart, “America Needs an Entirely New Foreign Policy for the Trump Age,” *The Atlantic*, Sep. 16, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/shield-of-the-republic-a-democratic->

exceptionalism” will remain part of the foreign-policy discourse, or what will be the new incarnations of this complicated idea. The analysis needs to stop here, but the discursive development – as contingent and indeterminate as it has been so far – definitely continues.

[foreign-policy-for-the-trump-age/570010/](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/17/opinion/democratic-party-cortez-foreign-policy.html); Daniel Bessner, “What Does Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Think About the South China Sea?” *The New York Times*, September 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/17/opinion/democratic-party-cortez-foreign-policy.html>. For a summary of these debates, see Daniel W. Drezner, “Progressives are thinking seriously about foreign policy,” *The Washington Post*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/11/28/progressives-are-thinking-seriously-about-foreign-policy/>.

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