SELF-EVIDENT BUT NOT SELF-EXECUTING:

COMPARING THE USE OF THE RHETORIC OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM BY BARACK OBAMA, HILLARY CLINTON, AND JOE BIDEN, 2007-2017

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Introduction

In May 2014, President Barack Obama delivered a commencement speech at the United States Military Academy. In the address, the president asserted his belief that "the United States is and remains the one indispensable nation," and said that he "[believed] in American exceptionalism with every fiber of [his] being," American exceptionalism usually defined as the idea that the United States is both unique and superior compared to any other country.[1] However, Obama argued, America's exceptional nature lay in its commitment to the rule of law, and did not give America license to ignore international norms. Nor should America take unilateral military action unless in case of a "direct threat to the United States," the president continued.[2] Defending his decision not to intervene more directly in Syria and other conflict areas with a high risk of civilian casualties, he said that "we must not create more enemies than we take off the battlefield."[3] In less formal encounters with the press in 2014, Obama reportedly summarized this foreign policy principle as "don't do stupid shit," or "don't do stupid stuff," depending on the media outlet.[4]

The president was criticized by his former secretary of state Hillary Clinton in an interview with *The Atlantic* in August 2014. Clinton claimed that the "failure" to arm the moderate Syrian opposition against President Assad at the start of the war had fostered the

[1] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony," Archived Obama White House Website, May 28, 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony; Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss, "Introduction: American Exceptionalism's Champions and Challengers," in *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays*, ed. Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss, Kindle edition (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2011), para. 1.

[2] Obama, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony."

[3] Ibid.

[4] Mike Allen, "'Don't Do Stupid Sh--' (Stuff)," Politico, June 1, 2014, https://www.politico.com/story/2014/06/dont-do-stupid-shit-president-obama-white-house-107293.html; Christi Parsons, Kathleen Hennessey, and Paul Richter, "Obama Argues against Use of Force to Solve Global Conflicts," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 2014, http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-obama-military-20140429-story.html.

conditions for the rise of ISIS.[5] Warning that an overly cautious approach to foreign affairs was no better than an over-aggressive policy, she argued that "one issue is that we don't even tell our own story very well these days," and that "great nations need organizing principles, and 'don't do stupid stuff' is not an organizing principle."[6] Clinton did note that she believed the four-word doctrine to be a political message rather than Obama's "worldview," and the media uproar following the interview prompted her to release a statement saying that she had not meant to attack the president. Nevertheless, her comments were widely seen as an effort to distance herself from Obama's foreign policy decisions.[7]

The incident over "don't do stupid stuff" shows that although the president and the former secretary of state shared an expressed belief that the United States was a great, unique nation, they had very different ideas about what responsibilities this status entailed. Another possible interpretation, if one were to reason the other way around, is that Obama and Clinton emphasized very different elements of America's supposed exceptional role to support and frame their policy positions. Whereas Obama emphasized the United States' responsibility to respect the rule of law and to exercise restraint in military matters, Clinton stressed the need for America to take an active, interventionist role in trying to alleviate conflicts. In either case, both politicians attempted to present their policy position on the United States' responsibilities concerning the civil war in Syria as being in line with America's exceptional nature and role in the world.

[5] Jeffrey Goldberg, "Hillary Clinton: 'Failure' to Help Syrian Rebels Led to the Rise of ISIS," *The Atlantic*, August 10, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/hillary-clinton-failure-to-help-syrian-rebels-led-to-the-rise-of-isis/375832/.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.; Zeke J. Miller, "Hillary Clinton Wants to 'Hug It Out' With Obama," *Time*, August 12, 2014, http://time.com/3104920/hillary-clinton-barack-obama-iraq-syria/.

American exceptionalism

Historians and political scientists have long identified American exceptionalism as a key element of American social and political culture.[8] Exceptionalism is associated with a variety of beliefs about the United States, such as the ideas that the American people possess unique virtues and character that account for America's unprecedented prosperity, that the United States has a unique history that makes it qualitatively different from all other countries and ensures that America will not be subject to the inevitable fall and decline faced by other great nations, and that America has a special mission to spread and protect the values of liberty and democracy.[9] Prior to the past few decades, most scholars on the topic attempted to answer the question as to how and to what extent the United States could rightfully be considered exceptional. Famously, the 19th-century French political scientist and historian Alexis de Tocqueville referred to the Americans as "exceptional" in his *Democracy in America*.[10] Since Tocqueville, many of the most celebrated works in American studies and historiography have explored, implicitly or explicitly, exceptionalist ideas about the American people and their country, considering to what extent they can be considered unique and peerless.[11] Although most accounts of American exceptionalism are celebratory, Seymour Martin Lipset concluded that the United States' unique nature was a "double-edged sword," arguing in 1997 that many of the problems facing society, including income inequality and low levels of political participation, were "inherently linked to the norms and

[8] Edwards and Weiss, "Introduction: American Exceptionalism's Champions and Challengers," para. 1.

[9] Ibid.; Trevor McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: U.S. Foreign Policy Since 1974* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 7.

[10] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), 768.

[11] See for example David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954); Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2014); Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

behavior of an open democratic society that appear so admirable."[12] Other authors, such as Godfrey Hodgson and Andrew Bacevich, have argued that the United States cannot or can no longer be rightly considered exceptional, and proclamations of the "end of American exceptionalism" are a recurring theme in American political thought, especially in the wake of American failures such as the wars in Vietnam or Iraq.[13]

In the 21st century, most scholarship has shifted away from the question of the validity of the claims of American exceptionalism. As Trevor McCrisken has pointed out, answering this question had always been difficult, because while "American differences can be identified and even evaluated . . . any declarations of superiority over alternative ways of approaching social realms can only be based on subjective criteria."[14] Instead, scholars such as McCrisken have attempted to identify the role of the belief in American exceptionalism in shaping political discourse, rhetoric, and policy itself. Although this emphasis on the influence of the belief in exceptionalism rather than the validity of exceptionalist ideas themselves undoubtedly represents a step forward, the incident described at the start of this introduction also reveals a gap in the literature on the topic. Most notably, the majority of studies on exceptionalist rhetoric have focused either primarily or exclusively on the presidency. Consequently, while there are various comparative studies concerning successive administrations and attempts to trace the development of exceptionalist rhetoric over time, less attention has been paid to relevant differences between prominent members of either of the two major parties in a given period. In addition, scholarship on the use of exceptionalist rhetoric in recent years is still in its infancy.

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[12] Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 13.

[13] Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2009); McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*.

[14] McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 3.

Thesis statement and relevance

Rather than emphasizing the differences between the two major parties or successive administrations, this study attempts to answer the question how three prominent members of the Democratic Party – Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Joe Biden – employed exceptionalist rhetoric in the decade between the primary campaigns of 2007/08 and the end of the Obama administration in 2017. *The primary thesis of this study is that while American exceptionalism played a key role in the speeches and statements made by Obama, Clinton, and Biden in the period between 2007 and 2017, there are significant differences both in substance and emphasis in the ways each of the three Democrats made use of exceptionalist rhetoric*. These differences concern the politicians' characterizations of the American people and American history, their comparisons between the United States and other countries when speaking to domestic and international audiences, and their views on the United States' responsibilities in global affairs and the limitations of American power in the post-Bush era. Together, the differences demonstrate that it is worthwhile not to limit the study of the rhetoric of American exceptionalism in politics to presidential speeches and statements only, as is most commonly done.

The three politicians considered here represent a cross-section of the mainstream wing of the Democratic Party and the executive branch of the United States government during the 2007-2017 period. Obama was elected to the United States Senate in 2004 representing Illinois. Subsequently, he was elected president in 2008, and reelected in 2012. Clinton[15] served as first lady of the United States between 1993 and 2001. From 2001 to 2009, she represented New York in the US Senate. After narrowly losing the race to become the

[15] Although she has styled herself as both "Hillary Rodham Clinton" and "Hillary Clinton" during her career, the maiden name Rodham is virtually always excluded when referring to Clinton by last name only. For the sake of consistency, she is be referred to as "Hillary Clinton" throughout this study.

Democratic nominee for the presidency in 2008 to Obama, she joined his administration as secretary of state, serving from 2009 to 2013, when she was succeeded by John Kerry. In 2016, she secured the Democratic nomination for president, but lost to Donald Trump in November. Finally, Joe Biden represented Delaware in the US Senate between 1973 and 2009. He unsuccessfully ran for president in 1988 and 2008, before serving as Obama's vice president from 2009 to 2017.

For Democratic Party leaders, constructing a rhetorical relationship to the idea of American exceptionalism has arguably been less straightforward than it has been for many of their Republican counterparts, at least prior to the Trump presidency. While the Republican Party has had relatively little trouble in aligning its more conservative message with the affirmation of American uniqueness and superiority, Democrats have had to find ways to reconcile exceptionalist ideas with an acknowledgement of the imperfections and injustices present in American society and an emphasis on international cooperation and multilateralism in the post-Bush world.

The difference shows clearly when looking at the party platforms for the 2016 election. In the preamble, the GOP platform asserts unequivocally: "We believe in American exceptionalism. We believe the United States of America is unlike any other nation on earth. We believe America is exceptional because of our historic role – first as refuge, then as defender, and now as exemplar of liberty for the world to see."[16] Later on, in the section titled "America Resurgent," the platform adds: "We are the party of peace through strength. We believe that American exceptionalism – the notion that our ideas and principles as a nation give us a unique place of moral leadership in the world – requires the United States to retake

[16] Republican National Convention, "Republican Platform 2016," 2016, i, https://prod-static-ngop-pbl.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/DRAFT_12_FINAL%5B1%5D-ben_1468872234.pdf.

its natural position as leader of the free world."[17] By contrast, the platform adopted by the Democratic National Convention hints at a more ambivalent stance. Alluding to Donald Trump's "Make America great again" campaign slogan, it reads: "Despite what some say, America is and has always been great – but not because it has been perfect. What makes America great is our unerring belief that we can make it better. We can and we will build a more just economy, a more equal society, and a more perfect union – because we are stronger together."[18]

The chosen period of 2007-2017 is particularly interesting with regard to the idea of American exceptionalism. For many observers, the prolonged military operations started by the Bush administration in Afghanistan and Iraq called into question America's capabilities and status as a force for good in the world.[19] On the other hand, President Obama's commitment to the exceptionalist framework was questioned by conservative politicians and commentators on numerous occasions. Over time, Obama, Clinton, and Biden attempted to reconcile the ambiguities described in the previous paragraph, while also emphasizing, to varying degrees, the importance of international cooperation and multilateralism in the post-Iraq world. Finally, 2016 Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump's atypical rejection of American exceptionalism – "I never liked the term" – ensured that the concept became a key point of contention in that year's presidential contest.[20]

[17] Ibid., 41.

[18] Democratic National Convention, "2016 Democratic Party Platform," July 21, 2016, 3, https://democrats.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2016_DNC_Platform.pdf.

[19] These observers included both liberals and some conservatives. See for example Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*.

[20] Greg Sargent, "Donald Trump's Revealing Quote about 'American Exceptionalism,'" *Washington Post*, June 7, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2016/06/07/donald-trumps-revealing-quote-about-american-exceptionalism/.

Sources and methodology

Before diving into the study of the three Democratic leaders' use of exceptionalist rhetoric, a few topics require further attention. These include (1) the selection of source material, (2) a further exploration of the existing literature on the rhetoric of American exceptionalism, and (3) a consideration of various methodological issues concerning the relationship between private beliefs, public statements, and political considerations, the influence of speechwriters, and the relationship between rhetoric and policy.

For the purpose of this study, rhetoric is defined broadly as any public statement made to persuade an audience or advance a political end. Any attempt to analyze the use of rhetoric by high-profile politicians such as Obama, Clinton, and Biden, has to contend with the fact that there are thousands of potential sources, many if not most of which feature at least some implicit or explicit appeals to exceptionalist beliefs. Consider, for example, the typically American invocation "God bless America and may God protect our troops," used by many American politicians to end every speech. This study is mostly concerned with texts featuring more extensive or elaborate references to and discussions of exceptionalist themes. These include campaign speeches – especially campaign announcements and speeches at the Democratic National Convention – as well as speeches delivered while in office. For Obama, these include the two inaugural and the annual State of the Union addresses. For all three Democrats, these include speeches delivered in a variety of forums and situations, both within the United States and abroad. Many of these were found by searching for relevant keywords in the *The American Presidency Project* database maintained by the University of California, Santa Barbara, the digital archives of the Obama White House, and through Google and various media outlets. In order to facilitate the comparison between Obama, Clinton, and Biden, some attempt has been made to select sources in which two or all of the speakers discussed their views on the same topic or event (e.g. the war in Syria) or spoke in

the same forum (e.g. the national conventions, the Munich Security Conference, and the Council on Foreign Relations). In addition to speeches, selected texts also include debate transcripts, public interviews or conversations, press conferences, and occasionally written interviews and op-eds.

Because speakers can deviate from texts prepared in advance, transcripts of verbal statements can either be "as prepared" or "as delivered." Typically, news organizations often print or publish statements as prepared, while official White House archives often publish transcripts as delivered. In a media environment that is increasingly dominated by video rather than print, there is some preference to use transcripts "as delivered" in a study of rhetoric. However, in many cases it is either difficult or disproportionately time-consuming to determine whether a given transcript is "as prepared" or "as delivered," and both types are used throughout this study.

The selected texts are considered by way of qualitative content analysis and close reading, and are contextualized in their relevant political environments. Some recent studies have taken a quantitative approach to the study of American exceptionalist rhetoric and have yielded interesting results, for example by tracking mentions of specific exceptionalist ideas over time, or statistically comparing the use of exceptionalist themes in speeches delivered within the United States or abroad.[21] However, the qualitative approach taken in this study seems better suited for the often nuanced comparisons necessary to answer the main research question.

[21] Rico Neumann and Kevin Coe, "The Rhetoric in the Modern Presidency: A Quantitative Assessment," in *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays*, ed. Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss (Jefferson, N.C: Mcfarland, 2011); Jason Gilmore, "Translating American Exceptionalism: Comparing Presidential Discourse About the United States at Home and Abroad," *International Journal of Communication* 8 (2014): 2416–37.

Contextualization is also key. It is not sufficient to analyze these texts purely in isolation. Important information can be gathered by considering the primary audience (domestic or international) of a speech or statement, as well as the political situation at the time it was delivered. For example, while celebratory remarks about the state of affairs in the United States by an incumbent politician may be part of a celebratory exceptionalist framework, they might also be an attempt to defend their own record, perhaps in an attempt to win reelection. Factors such as these are important when trying to explain how politicians have used exceptionalist rhetoric in various situations, and are considered throughout this study.

Defining exceptionalism

Some further exploration of the existing literature on the rhetoric of American exceptionalism is required. Two main strands of exceptionalist beliefs are usually distinguished. On the one hand, there is the idea of the United States as an exemplary nation, the "city upon a hill," free from the corruptions of the old world. This conception of America is typically associated with an isolationist foreign policy. On the other hand, there is the missionary strand of American exceptionalist thought. According to this tradition, the United States has a unique responsibility to lead the world and actively protect the values of freedom and democracy across the globe.[22] Both sets ideas have been invoked by political leaders throughout American history.

It should be noted that the distinction between the two strands is not without criticism. In particular, political scientist Hilde Restad has argued that the dichotomy is of little use, and is based on outdated conceptions of American history.[23] She writes that most proponents of

[22] McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 2.

[23] Hilde Eliassen Restad, "Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science: US Foreign Policy and American Exceptionalism," *American Political Thought* 1 (2012): 53–76.

the exemplary-missionary dichotomy have mistakenly believed that the two conceptions of American exceptionalism have either had cyclical waves of popularity throughout American history, or that the exemplary view was dominant until the end of the 19th century, and was then largely supplanted by the missionary view. Instead, Restad argues that American foreign policy principles have been more consistent throughout US history, and can be summarized as "unilateral internationalism."[24]

Siobhán McEvoy-Levy takes another approach in conceptualizing American exceptionalism in her study of American foreign policy rhetoric at the end of the Cold War. Rather than describing exceptionalism as a coherent set of beliefs (or multiple coherent sets of beliefs), McEvoy-Levy describes it as a "para-ideological" theme in American rhetoric "because it is a crystallization of a set of related ideas which explain the world and the US role therein. It does not have the coherence of an ideology nor has it been codified as a means towards some definable political end, but it underwrites much of US foreign policy."[25] These ideas include "a national identity based on a sense of uniqueness and a right to leadership, a belief in the moral superiority and the good motives of the United States, a concern for order and stability in the world," among others.[26] The para-ideological nature of the American exceptionalist theme fits with McEvoy-Levy's understanding of the purpose of political rhetoric, that is to create a "climate of belief, a consensus of broad values," in a "community-building" effort that "both precedes and enables crisis management."[27]

[24] Hilde Restad, *American Exceptionalism: An Idea That Made a Nation and Remade the World* (London: Routledge, 2014), 3.

[25] Siobhán McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy: Public Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 23.

[26] Ibid., 143.

[27] Ibid., 3.

Although the traditional missionary and exemplary strands of exceptionalist ideas provide useful points of reference, as does Restad's introduction of the "unilateral internationalist" framework, it is McEvoy-Levy's more broadly defined conception of exceptionalism as a para-ideology that may prove most useful in reading the wide range of exceptionalist ideas featured in the texts that are considered in the following chapters. The traditional characterizations may be preferred when studying developments over longer periods of time, but provide little benefit for the scope and purpose of this study. It is of course be pointed out when the politicians studied refer to ideas typical of one or both of the usual conceptions of American exceptionalism, but no attempt is made to shoehorn them into either of the strands usually distinguished.

Of course, there is much more relevant literature to be considered, and to be discussed at the relevant places in the following chapters.

Private beliefs, political messages, authorship

Any attempt to analyze political rhetoric has to address certain fundamental questions about the distinction between personal, private beliefs and public statements which may be tailored to specific audiences to achieve specific political ends, about authorship, and about the relationship between rhetoric and policy.

These questions are most easily addressed by considering the questions the present study does *not* attempt to answer. First of all, this study is not (primarily) an attempt to reveal what Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden *believed* about American exceptionalism in the period studied. It goes without saying that politicians may often say or write things in public that they do not personally believe or know to be true, even if they may claim otherwise. Without access to mindreading or reliably candid documents or statements, it can be difficult to determine the differences and relationship between sincerely held beliefs and

politically crafted messages. Trevor McCrisken attempted to distinguish between the two at various points in his study of American exceptionalism and the post-Vietnam administrations.[28] Unfortunately, his arguments, based in large part on analysis of declassified minutes of private meetings, are not entirely convincing. McCrisken points out that "nowhere in the public or archive record analyzed here, including declassified accounts of [National Security Council] meetings, is it even implied that once a particular course has been chosen it will then be packaged in exceptionalist terms."[29] McCrisken concludes that the policy-makers involved sincerely believed their own exceptionalist political messages because they used similar language behind closed doors as they did in public. However, these similarities might also simply show that policy-makers are aware of the need to present policy decisions within the rhetorical framework of American exceptionalism, and include this understanding in their private discussions. While McCrisken could rightly argue that "the belief in American exceptionalism . . . provides the framework for discourse in US foreign policy making," it does not follow that this public discourse aligns with the private beliefs of the politicians considered here.

For the purposes of this study, the question of personal versus public beliefs is largely sidestepped. It is simply assumed that politicians make an effort to maintain a certain public profile that may or may not correspond closely to their private beliefs. Of course, these public profiles may very well include elements meant to convince the audience that the speaker sincerely believes his or her public story, for example by tracing back their political message to the values allegedly instilled in them by their parents. As part of their public persona, these elements provide interesting material to compare Obama's, Clinton's and Biden's accounts of American exceptionalism. However, judging the factual validity of these personal claims is

[28] McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*.

[29] Ibid., 187.

difficult, and lies outside the scope of this study. Only the third chapter, on Joe Biden, contains something of an exception to this point, because of Biden's decision to incorporate a convincingly non-political message about personal resilience into his political framework of American exceptionalism in the final year of his vice presidency.

Related to the question of personal and political beliefs is the issue of authorship. In modern times, politicians frequently (and famously) rely on professional speechwriters to fulfill a large role in crafting speeches and other public statements. Although some journalists have attempted to untangle the collaborative process of speechwriting – such as in Greg Jaffe's reconstruction of the writing of Barack Obama's speech at the 50th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery marches[30] – it is usually not possible to determine the precise influence both the speaker and his or her speechwriters may have had in crafting any particular address. Throughout this study, it is therefore assumed that speakers retain final control over their statements, and that speechwriters attempt to write texts that are consistent with their boss' political persona.

Rhetoric and policy

Second of all, the present study is about rhetoric, and is therefore not a study of policy. No attempt is made to evaluate whether any policies enacted or proposed by the Democrats considered here were consistent with exceptionalist ideas, nor even whether those policies were consistent with their rhetoric. For example, while President Obama argued for restraint in the use of military force by the United States, his administration oversaw a significant increase in the use of lethal drone strikes.[31] However, these drone strikes were the

[30] Greg Jaffe, "Obama's New Patriotism," *Washington Post*, June 3, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2015/06/03/obama-and-american-exceptionalism/?utm_term=.4a6d5a6e1827.

[31] Jessica Purkiss and Jack Serle, "Obama's Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes than Bush," The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, January 17, 2017,

topic of far fewer prominent speeches and public statements than the use of conventional military means such as the deployment of soldiers or missile strikes. As such, discussion of the drone program and other such "under the radar" policy measures is largely absent from the following chapters.

Nevertheless, it is not suggested that there is no relationship between policy and rhetoric. As McEvoy-Levy has pointed out, "the relationship between rhetoric and policy is a complicated one."[32] Because American exceptionalism has been such an important part of the United States' political culture, and because politicians continually face the demand to justify their policies within an exceptionalist framework, the range of policies possible is theoretically limited to those courses of action that can be defended in exceptionalist terms. On the other hand, it quickly becomes clear that the "para-ideology" of exceptionalism is also flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of potential policy decisions. It would be naive to assert that policy is dependent on exceptionalist beliefs, rather than political and strategic concerns. At the same time, the pervasiveness of the culture of American exceptionalism shapes much of the political dialogue and thereby inevitably influences policy-making. As McCrisken concludes in his post-Vietnam foreign policy study: "The belief in American exceptionalism, therefore, provides the framework for discourse in US foreign policy making even if it is rarely the main determining factor of policy itself."[33]

Structure

One chapter is dedicated to each of the three politicians. The chapters are divided into three parts: the "American character," the "American journey," and "America and the world."

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https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-17/obamas-covert-drone-war-in-numbers-ten-times-more-strikes-than-bush.

[32] McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism*, 13.

[33] McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 187.

The first is concerned with ideas about the character and attitude of the American people. The second part includes accounts and understandings of American history, while the third deals with ideas and beliefs about America's relationship to other countries and international affairs. Of course, these distinctions are far from absolute, as there is significant overlap between all three areas. Nevertheless, they are useful in ordering the myriad of ideas associated with American exceptionalism in each of the studied politicians' rhetoric.

Chapter 1 – Barack Obama

Some of Barack Obama's most notorious remarks on American exceptionalism came early in his presidency. During a press conference at a NATO summit in Strasbourg, France, in April 2009, a reporter from the Financial Times asked the president whether he subscribed "to the school of American exceptionalism that sees America as uniquely qualified to lead to the world," or whether Obama's commitment to multilateral cooperation should be taken as a sign of a "slightly different philosophy."[34] The president offered a nuanced response, saying that he was "enormously proud of [his] country and its role and history in the world," and that he believed the core values enshrined in American law and democratic practices to be exceptional, if imperfectly implemented, while also acknowledging the "value and wonderful qualities of other countries," and conceding that the United States was "not always going to be right."[35] However, it was the first sentence of Obama's answer that got the most attention in American media: "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism."[36] Conservative pundits in particular decried Obama's statement as a thinly veiled rebuttal of American exceptionalism.[37]

Doubts and questions about Obama's view of America had also featured prominently during the 2008 election campaign, most notably in the controversy surrounding Obama's relation with Chicago pastor Jeremiah Wright, who had condemned the United States in strong terms, including the phrase "God damn America," in two sermons in 2001 and 2003. The controversy prompted Obama to write and deliver a speech – dubbed "A More Perfect

[34] Barack Obama, "The President's News Conference in Strasbourg," The American Presidency Project, April 4, 2009, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=85959.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Neumann and Coe, "The Rhetoric in the Modern Presidency: A Quantitative Assessment," para. 3.

Union" – to answer what he considered to be Wright's "profoundly distorted view of this country."[38] Four years later, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney told an audience that Obama "doesn't have the same feelings about American exceptionalism that we do," to which the president responded by pointing to the exceptionalist themes in his breakthrough speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, and saying that "my entire career has been a testimony to American exceptionalism."[39] Despite his efforts, questioning Obama's allegiance to the idea of exceptionalism became a central trope in Republican discourse about the president.[40]

Through a content analysis of major presidential speeches to the American public, Gilmore, Sheets, and Rowling have found that Obama invoked exceptionalist ideas much more frequently in his speeches as president than any of his predecessors since 1945.[41] The authors offer four potential explanations for this finding: first, that there has been a general increase in the use of exceptionalist phrases in presidential addresses since the end of the Cold War; second and third, that presidents are more likely to invoke exceptionalist ideas during economic crises and wartime; and finally, that Obama may have "compensated" for the repeated allegations of his supposed lack of patriotism by mentioning exceptionalist ideas as frequently as he could.[42] Questions can be raised about the sample size required to test some of the authors' hypotheses, and the study does not address the qualitative question about *how* the various presidents have used exceptionalist ideas and rhetoric. However, the

[38] Barack Obama, "Address at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia: 'A More Perfect Union,'" The American Presidency Project, March 18, 2008, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/277610.

[39] Michael A. Memoli, "Obama Dismisses Romney Charge on Belief in American Exceptionalism," *Los Angeles Times,* April 2, 2012, http://articles.latimes.com/2012/apr/02/news/sns-la-pn-obama-romney-exceptionalism-20120402.

[40] Jason Gilmore, Penelope Sheets, and Charles Rowling, "Make No Exception, Save One: American Exceptionalism, the American Presidency, and the Age of Obama," *Communication Monographs* 83, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 505, https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2016.1182638.

[41] Ibid., 515.

[42] Ibid.

study does show that American exceptionalism played a key role in Obama's rhetoric throughout his presidency.

Most previous studies on Obama's rhetorical use of American exceptionalism have focused on the 2008 election campaign and Obama's first term in office. Although many of these analyses are equally valid for the latter years of his presidency, and are discussed in the remainder of this chapter, an updated analysis is still deemed valuable, especially since some of Obama's major speeches on American exceptionalism – such as those in Selma and West Point – were delivered in his second term in office. The Obama strand of American exceptionalism is discussed here with regard to three key themes: the character of the American people, the American journey and the history of progress in American society, and the role of the United States in world affairs.

The American Character

One of the central themes in Barack Obama's rhetoric is the character of the American people. Drawing on Seymour Martin Lipset's concept of the American Creed, M. Karen Walker has identified appeals to the virtues of the American people as one of the key exceptionalist rhetorical resources, featuring the "ideographic constructs of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire."[43] In discussing the history of the American people in his second inaugural address, President Obama referred to these ideas almost to a tee, before adding that Americans also needed solidarity and shared responsibility to fulfill their promise:

> Through it all, we have never relinquished our skepticism of central authority nor have we succumbed to the fiction that all society's ills can be cured through government alone. Our celebration of initiative and enterprise, our insistence on hard work and personal responsibility, these are constants in our character.

[43] M. Karen Walker, "Resolving Rhetorical Tensions," in *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays*, ed. Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss, Kindle edition (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2011), para. 13.

> But we have always understood that when times change, so must we; that fidelity to our founding principles requires new responses to new challenges; that preserving our individual freedoms ultimately requires collective action. For the American people can no more meet the demands of today's world by acting alone than American soldiers could have met the forces of fascism or communism with muskets and militias. No single person can train all the math and science teachers we'll need to equip our children for the future, or build the roads and networks and research labs that will bring new jobs and businesses to our shores. Now more than ever, we must do these things together, as one nation and one people.[44]

The American people's resilience and capacity for change also featured prominently in Obama's State of the Union addresses, and served as a unifying element in his view of the United States. The "imaginations of our entrepreneurs and the pride of the hardest working people on Earth" had made America "the greatest force of progress and prosperity in human history," he said in 2009.[45] The next year, he emphasized the shared aspirations of all kinds of Americans, and their shared "stubborn resilience in the face of adversity," adding that "because of this spirit, this great decency and great strength, I have never been more hopeful about America's future than I am tonight. . . . We do not give up. We do not quit."[46] In 2016, he spoke of America's "unique strengths as a nation – our optimism and work ethic, our spirit of discovery, our diversity, our commitment to rule of law."[47] In addition to contemporary examples of hard-working Americans, Obama frequently used historical examples that demonstrated these qualities: Americans built railroad tracks from coast to coast "in the midst of Civil War," while the veterans of the Second World War "built the strongest economy and

[44] Barack Obama, "Inaugural Address," The American Presidency Project, January 21, 2013, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=102827.

[45] Barack Obama, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress," The American Presidency Project, February 24, 2009, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=85753.

[46] Barack Obama, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," The American Presidency Project, January 27, 2010, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=87433.

[47] Barack Obama, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," The American Presidency Project, January 12, 2016, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=111174.

middle class the world has ever known."[48] And after the crisis caused by the Soviet Union's launch of the Sputnik satellite, American investments in research and education "unleashed a wave of innovation that created new industries and millions of new jobs."[49] In each of these cases, Obama argued, "Government didn't supplant private enterprise; it catalyzed private enterprise."[50]

To explain the disconnect between the virtues of the American people and the mistakes and bad decisions that led them to crises, Obama made frequent use of the rhetorical genre of the jeremiad. The American jeremiad, named after the Biblical prophet Jeremiah and identified by Sacvan Bercovitch as one of the key rhetorical traditions in American political life, has its origins in Puritan sermons characterizing the Americans as a chosen people, who had abandoned and had to return to their own basic values and virtues.[51] Originally and in Europe, jeremiads emphasized the people's forsakenness and God's inevitable punishment. However, Bercovitch argues that in the American colonies, this pessimism would be transformed into an "unshakable optimism" and belief in the American promise, with God's vengeance serving a corrective rather than punitive function.[52]

Consistent with the traditional jeremiadic style, Obama frequently emphasized that political problems were not all attributable to failures of government alone, but that the American people were also to blame. Combining an appeal to American values with criticism of the Bush administration's economic policy, he told the crowd at the 2008 Democratic

[48] Obama, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress"; Barack Obama, "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union," The American Presidency Project, February 12, 2013, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=102826.

[49] Barack Obama, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," The American Presidency Project, January 25, 2011, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=88928.

[50] Obama, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress."

[51] Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

[52] Ibid., 7–8.

National Convention: “These challenges are not all of government's making. But the failure to respond is a direct result of a broken politics in Washington and the failed policies of George W. Bush. America, we are better than these last eight years.”[53] He told the Joint Session of Congress in 2009 that “if we’re honest with ourselves, we’ll admit that for too long, we have not always met [our] responsibilities as a Government or as a people.”[54] Both as individuals and through the government, Americans had “lived through an era where too often short-term gains were prized over long-term prosperity.”[55] In 2012, he framed his re-election campaign as a “fight to restore the values that built the largest middle class and the strongest economy the world has ever known.”[56] Finally, in his farewell address in January 2017, he called for a return to the values of democracy:

> Our Constitution is a remarkable, beautiful gift, but it's really just a piece of parchment. It has no power on its own. . . .
>
> America, we weaken [the] ties [that make us one] when we allow our political dialogue to become so corrosive that people of good character aren't even willing to enter into public service; so coarse with rancor that Americans with whom we disagree are seen not just as misguided, but as malevolent. We weaken those ties when we define some of us as more American than others, when we write off the whole system as inevitably corrupt, *and when we sit back and blame the leaders we elect without examining our own role in electing them* [emphasis added].
>
> It falls to each of us to be those anxious, jealous guardians of our democracy; to embrace the joyous task we've been given to continually try to improve this great Nation of ours. Because for all our outward differences, we, in fact, all share the same proud title, the most important office in a democracy: citizen. Citizen.[57]

In each of these cases, Obama made it a point to appeal to the American people, instead of laying blame solely with “Washington” or the failings of the political system. In

[53] Barack Obama, “Transcript: Barack Obama’s Acceptance Speech,” NPR.org, August 28, 2008, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94087570.

[54] Obama, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress.”

[55] Ibid.

[56] Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the Democratic National Convention,” Archived Obama White House Website, September 7, 2012, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/07/remarks-president-democratic-national-convention.

[57] Barack Obama, “Farewell Address to the Nation from Chicago, Illinois,” The American Presidency Project, January 10, 2017, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=119928.

Obama's reading, then, challenges in American society occur when individuals and the government fail to live up to their exceptional character.

How do these accounts relate to Bercovitch's conception of the typical American jeremiad? In one aspect, Obama's sustained social and self-criticism fit the jeremiadic motif of a people struggling and often failing to live up to their basic values. In addition, the way in which Obama framed the principles laid out in the founding documents as a "gift" which the Americans must struggle to prove worthy of is reminiscent of the religious connotations in the Puritan comparisons between the American colonists and the Biblical people of Israel. In his second inaugural address, he further explicated these religious connotations in talking about the Declaration of Independence, saying that "while freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by His people here on Earth."[58] As Bercovitch concludes, "Only in the United States has nationalism carried with it the Christian meaning of the sacred. . . . Only *America* has united nationality and universality, civic and spiritual selfhood, secular and redemptive history, the country's past and paradise to be, in a single synthetic ideal."[59] However, Obama's rhetoric does not fit Bercovitch's assessment that the lamentation of the original jeremiad transformed over time into unqualified celebration in the typically American variant. In addition, whereas Bercovitch's account of the jeremiad features an "unshakable optimism" and a "promise of ultimate success," Obama's optimism seemed less certain, more conditional: America had great promise, but fulfilling that promise was not inevitable.

The American Journey

Closely related to the American character in Barack Obama's conception of American exceptionalism was his view on the history of the United States itself. Just like American

[58] Obama, "Inaugural Address," January 21, 2013.

[59] Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 176.

individuals find ways to adapt to new circumstances, Obama said in his 2008 victory speech that "the true genius of America [is] that America can change. Our union can be perfected."[60]

James Darsey has analyzed "the journey" as the archetypal metaphor employed in Obama's campaign for the presidency. The confluence of Obama's personal journey and America's national journey towards a more perfect union provided "much of the potency of Obama's rhetoric," Darsey argues.[61] Darsey places Obama's rhetoric in the same tradition as ideas such as Manifest Destiny and Emerson's "nation always in the process of becoming," with the ideas of equality and freedom being the central elements guiding America's journey.[62] He shows how Obama framed his unlikely life story and his campaign as part of America's journey toward equality and freedom.[63] In an analysis of the "More Perfect Union" speech delivered during the Wright controversy, Robert E. Terrill has argued convincingly that Obama attempted to present his own mixed racial background as a symbol for the diversity of the American people, while also pointing out that Obama chose to begin his speech not with a citation from the Declaration of Independence, but rather one from the Constitution, "in order to form a more perfect Union," so as to emphasize that America is always a "work in progress."[64] "This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected," Obama said, while acknowledging that both "the black community" and his white grandmother who sometimes made racially charged statements were "a part of me, and . . . a part of America, this country that I love."[65]

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[60] Barack Obama, "The Full Text of Barack Obama's Victory Speech," The Independent, November 5, 2008, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/the-full-text-of-barack-obamas-victory-speech-993008.html.

[61] James Darsey, "Barack Obama and America's Journey," *Southern Communication Journal* 74, no. 1 (February 2, 2009): 89, https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940802571151.

[62] Ibid., 91.

[63] Ibid., 94.

[64] Robert E. Terrill, "Unity and Duality in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95, no. 4 (November 1, 2009): 367, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630903296192.

[65] Obama, "Address at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia: 'A More Perfect Union.'"

Terrill considers the speech through W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness."[66] In an explicit nod to American exceptionalism, Obama noted with regard to his mixed heritage that "as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible."[67] Despite Obama's attempts to present himself as an embodiment of American history, Terrill points out that while he "[seemed] able to transcend the color-line, absorbing into himself all the various fragmented identities divellicated by America's racial frictions . . . he [did] not position himself as a savior whose election would [have initiated] a racial millennium."[68] Instead, Terrill argues, Obama invited the audience to take a "doubled perspective" themselves as a way to make progress in race relations.[69]

The idea of America as a permanent "work in progress" is key, and shows the limitations of approaching Obama's rhetoric through a teleological lens. Throughout his speeches, Obama was careful to avoid the suggestion that American progress was inevitable, or that the project of American progress would ever be complete. Quoting Robert Kennedy, he told Congress in 2011 that "'the future is not a gift. It is an achievement.' Sustaining the American Dream has never been about standing pat. It has required each generation to sacrifice and struggle and meet the demands of a new age."[70] While America was unique, according to Obama, as "the first nation to be founded for the sake of an idea," namely that each individual deserved to "shape [their] own destiny," the implementation of that idea was never a given, and remained incomplete.[71] After quoting from the Declaration of Independence in his second inaugural address, he said: "Today we continue a never-ending

[66] Terrill, "Unity and Duality in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union.'"

[67] Obama, "Address at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia: 'A More Perfect Union.'"

[68] Terrill, "Unity and Duality in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union,'" 365.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Obama, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," January 25, 2011.

[71] Ibid.

journey to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time. For history tells us that while these truths may be self-evident, they've never been self-executing."[72]

In 2015, President Obama delivered a speech marking the 50th anniversary of the civil rights march starting in Selma, Alabama. In his reconstruction of the speechwriting process for the *Washington Post*, Greg Jaffe noted the influence of yet another round of attacks on Obama's love of country, spearheaded this time by former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani.[73] Spurred by these events and the occasion, Obama set out once again to deliver a speech centering around exceptionalist themes. He recalled that the marchers were not universally praised at the time: "Back then, they were called Communists, half-breeds, outside agitators, sexual and moral degenerates, and worse – everything but the name their parents gave them. Their faith was questioned. Their lives were threatened. Their patriotism was challenged."[74] However, despite this opposition from a significant part of the American public, Obama framed the marchers as quintessentially American:

> And yet, what could be more American than what happened in this place?
> . . .
> What greater expression of faith in the American experiment than this; what greater form of patriotism is there; than the belief that America is not yet finished, that we are strong enough to be self-critical, that each successive generation can look upon our imperfections and decide that it is in our power to remake this nation to more closely align with our highest ideals?[75]

Describing the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution as a "call to action," Obama saw Selma as "one leg in our long journey toward freedom," a journey that also required "more than singing [the country's] praises or avoiding

[72] Obama, "Inaugural Address," January 21, 2013.

[73] Jaffe, "Obama's New Patriotism."

[74] Maya Rhodan, "Transcript: Read Full Text of President Barack Obama's Speech in Selma," *Time*, March 7, 2015, http://time.com/3736357/barack-obama-selma-speech-transcript/.

[75] Ibid.

uncomfortable truths."[76] "That's what makes us unique," and protests such as Selma "[cement] our reputation as a beacon of opportunity," he continued, in a nod to the exemplary "city upon a hill" conception of American exceptionalism.[77] In his remarks, Obama again emphasized the unique diversity of the American people. The dualities of American society explored in the "More Perfect Union" speech, and embodied by Obama himself, also featured prominently in Selma:

> That's what it means to love America. That's what it means to believe in America. That's what it means when we say America is exceptional. . . . We know America is what we make of it. We are Lewis and Clark and Sacajawea. . . . We are the inventors of gospel and jazz and the blues, bluegrass and country, hip-hop and rock and roll. . . . We are the people Langston Hughes wrote of. . . . We are the people Emerson wrote of. . . . we are large, in the words of Whitman, containing multitudes.[78]

In Obama's view, events like Selma showed simultaneously that action would always be necessary to bring about social change and fulfill the American promise, and that change was possible: "For when it comes to the pursuit of justice, we can afford neither complacency nor despair."[79] Although he acknowledged that minorities still faced significant problems in 2015, he emphasized the significant progress that had been made since the Selma march fifty years prior. Calling for collective action, he concluded: "Because the single most powerful word in our democracy is the word 'We.' We The People. We Shall Overcome. Yes We Can. It is owned by no one. It belongs to everyone. Oh, what a glorious task we are given, to continually try to improve this great nation of ours."[80]

By avoiding teleology, and invoking promise rather than destiny, Obama was able to frame the ideas of national progress and American character as fundamentally

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[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.; Edwards and Weiss, "Introduction: American Exceptionalism's Champions and Challengers."

[78] Rhodan, "Transcript: Read Full Text of President Barack Obama's Speech in Selma."

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid.

interdependent: Throughout Obama's reading of history, Americans moved towards imperfect fulfilment of the promise of the Declaration of Independence only through staying true to their own values and virtues. Using some of his favorite examples, he told his Chicago audience in his farewell address:

> For 240 years, our Nation's call to citizenship has given work and purpose to each new generation. It's what led patriots to choose republic over tyranny, pioneers to trek west, slaves to brave that makeshift railroad to freedom. It's what pulled immigrants and refugees across oceans and the Rio Grande. It's what pushed women to reach for the ballot. It's what powered workers to organize. It's why GIs gave their lives at Omaha Beach and Iwo Jima, Iraq and Afghanistan, and why men and women from Selma to Stonewall were prepared to give theirs as well.
>
> So that's what we mean when we say America's exceptional: not that our Nation has been flawless from the start, but that we have shown the capacity to change and make life better for those who follow. Yes, our progress has been uneven. The work of democracy has always been hard. It's always been contentious. Sometimes it's been bloody. For every two steps forward, it often feels we take one step back. But the long sweep of America has been defined by forward motion, a constant widening of our founding creed to embrace all and not just some.[81]

America and the World

Foreign policy was perhaps the domain in which Barack Obama sought most explicitly to distance himself from his predecessor, George W. Bush, and many of his other political opponents. Throughout his campaigns and presidency, he sought to position his, in his own view, more judicious and effective foreign policy approach within a specific exceptionalist framework that emphasized multilateral cooperation and diplomacy.

In their analysis of the 2008 presidential campaign, Ivie and Giner described Obama's "moral edge" in the 2008 Democratic primary and general election, being the only candidate who had opposed the invasion of Iraq from the beginning, and how he used this edge to campaign for a different view of America's role in the world: "An exceptional America was still the world's last and best hope for promoting freedom and justice over tyranny and

[81] Obama, "Farewell Address to the Nation from Chicago, Illinois."

despair, but it would operate on the world stage with a democratic attitude of interdependence to achieve these goals."[82]

It should be noted that in his primary debates with Hillary Clinton on the topic of Iraq, Obama framed his position of being judicious in foreign military intervention in terms of national security, rather than as a matter of American exceptionalism.[83] As his previously quoted comments in Strasbourg show, however, he would quickly find a method to combine his foreign policy approach with an exceptionalist framework. Like his predecessors, he would draw on both the exemplary and missionary strands of exceptionalist thought. Hilde Restad has argued that the United States' foreign policy tradition has been more constant throughout history than is usually argued by authors who view (exemplary) isolationism and (missionary) interventionism as being either cyclical or successive trends.[84] Restad calls this constant foreign policy tradition "unilateral internationalism," arguing that the United States has "always been internationalist. . . but has preferred to conduct its foreign policy in a unilateral, rather than multilateral manner."[85] She continues by noting that "as we saw from the reactions to President Obama's multilateral strategy in Libya in 2011, engaging in substantive multilateralism is in fact seen as being 'un-American.'"[86] Although Restad is correct in pointing out that (conservative) elements of the media considered Obama's foreign

[82] Robert L. Ivie and Oscar Giner, "American Exceptionalism in a Democratic Idiom: Transacting the Mythos of Change in the 2008 Presidential Campaign," *Communication Studies* 60, no. 4 (August 10, 2009): 361, https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970903109961.

[83] Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, "Democratic Presidential Candidates Debate in Los Angeles, California," The American Presidency Project, January 31, 2008, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=76339.

[84] Restad, *American Exceptionalism*; It should be noted that Jason A. Edwards, one of the foremost authors on the two strands of exceptionalism, also believes they can coexist, as evidenced by his work on the Clinton administration. See Jason A. Edwards, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World: President Clinton's Foreign Policy Rhetoric* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

[85] Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, 3.

[86] Ibid.

policy approach unfitting for America's role in the world, the president himself explicitly attempted to defend multilateralism within an exceptionalist framework.

Obama's rhetoric on his administration's approach to the conflict in Syria provides an interesting case study. In September 2013, three weeks after president Assad had used chemical weapons on his own people, Barack Obama delivered a televised speech to the American people. Obama's preference for multilateral solutions served as the direct motive to make his address. Although he wanted to justify his plan for a military strike, he asked Congress to delay its vote on the matter in light of a Russian diplomatic effort to persuade Assad to hand in his chemical weapons to have them destroyed. He said that he had resisted intervening militarily in Syria because "we cannot resolve someone else's civil war through force, particularly after a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan."[87] However, because it was deemed unacceptable to let the ban on the use of chemical weapons erode, Obama argued that "it is in the national security interests of the United States to respond to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons through a targeted military strike."[88] In addition to this national security argument, Obama also defended an internationalist exceptionalist view of the United States: "My fellow Americans, for nearly seven decades the United States has been the anchor of global security. This has meant doing more than forging international agreements. It has meant enforcing them. The burdens of leadership are often heavy, but the world's a better place because we have borne them."[89] However, although the president defended American intervention abroad, he would do so in heavily qualified terms:

> Our ideals and principles, as well as our national security, are at stake in Syria, along with our leadership of a world where we seek to ensure that the worst weapons will

[87] Barack Obama, "Obama Syria Speech: Full Text," *BBC News*, September 11, 2013, sec. US & Canada, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-24044553.

[88] Ibid. Obama decided to ask Congress for approval of the military strike in his role as "president of the world's oldest constitutional democracy," another clear invocation of American exceptionalism.

[89] Ibid.

> never be used. America is not the world's policeman. Terrible things happen across the globe, and it is beyond our means to right every wrong. But when, *with modest effort and risk*, we can stop children from being gassed to death and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act [emphasis added]. That's what makes America different. That's what makes us exceptional.[90]

As a whole, the speech shows a rhetorical balancing act between interventionist exceptionalism and war-weariness not dissimilar to the latter decades of the 20th century. Then, as Trevor McCrisken has analyzed, presidents attempted to reassure the American people that military operations would be swift, as small-scale as possible and effective, in order to assuage fears of "another Vietnam."[91] A similar dynamic is visible in Obama's justification for a military strike in Syria, with the lengthy wars in Afghanistan and Iraq substituting for Vietnam.

A further justification of Obama's policy concerning the war in Syria came in May 2014, in the commencement speech at West Point already quoted in the introduction of this thesis. Whereas Obama used his September 2013 speech to defend his plan for an American military strike in national security and exceptionalist terms, in May 2014 he emphasized the exceptionalist credentials of his commitment to multilateralism and the rule of law:

> You see, American influence is always stronger when we lead by example. We can't exempt ourselves from the rules that apply to everybody else. We can't call on others to make commitments to combat climate change if a whole lot of our political leaders deny that it's taking place. We can't try to resolve problems in the South China Sea when we have refused to make sure that the Law of the Sea Convention is ratified by our United States Senate, despite the fact that our top military leaders say the treaty advances our national security. That's not leadership; that's retreat. That's not strength; that's weakness. It would be utterly foreign to leaders like Roosevelt and Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy. I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being. But what makes us exceptional is not our ability to flout international norms and the rule of law; it is our willingness to affirm them through our actions.[92]

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[90] Ibid.

[91] McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*.

[92] Obama, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony."

Whenever "issues of global concern," but not directly threatening the United States, arose, Obama argued, "we should not go it alone," instead focusing on multilateral cooperation and a broad range of tools including "diplomacy and development; sanctions and isolation; appeals to international law; and, if just, necessary and effective, multilateral military action."[93] However, Obama did defend the right to use force "unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it – when our people are threatened, when our livelihoods are at stake, when the security of our allies is in danger."[94] Hrnjaz and Krstić have concluded that Obama used an "implicit dual discourse," by arguing that the United States should abide by international law and should refrain from intervening in every conflict, but still allowing for "the use of force even if [it] is not in accordance with the norms of international law, when US national interests are threatened."[95] This conclusion seems somewhat problematic. The distinction made by Obama is primarily between unilateral and multilateral action. He allowed for the former when necessary to defend American "core interests" – although criticism can be raised about the vague nature of this term – but did not argue that a threat to those interests would allow a use of force inconsistent with international law. Indeed, Obama emphasized that "in these circumstances, we still need to ask tough questions about whether our actions are proportional and effective and just."[96]

Obama also stressed the need for cooperation and multilateralism in non-military issues. In doing so, he downplayed the importance of the United States' supposedly exceptional history and position, or elevated other allied nations to the same position. At a state dinner in New Delhi in 2015, he referred to one of his famous catchphrases in telling

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Miloš Hrnjaz and Milan Krstić, "Obama's Dual Discourse on American Exceptionalism," *Croatian International Relations Review* 21, no. 73 (2015): 25, https://doi.org/10.1515/cirr-2015-0010.

[96] Obama, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony."

Prime Minister Modi: "I've often said that my life story could only happen in America. But of course, Mr. Prime Minister, your story could only happen in India."[97] In a speech in Berlin in 2013, he spoke of "great nations," and said that "when Europe and America lead with our hopes instead of our fears, we do things that no other nations can do, no other nations will do."[98] Statements like these are examples of what Gilmore has termed "mutual exceptionalism," a rhetorical strategy American presidents employ for audiences overseas whereby they "[elevate] another country to the level of the United States so that both can be spoken about at an exceptional level."[99]

On different occasions, Obama did not allude to exceptionalism at all, but instead referred to supposedly universal principles and ideals. In Hiroshima in 2016, Obama made reference to the idea that "all men are created equal," and said that "realizing that ideal has never been easy, even within our own borders . . . But staying true to that story is worth the effort. It is an ideal to be strived for, an ideal that extends across continents and across oceans."[100] An even clearer example can be found in his final address to the United Nations' General Assembly in September 2016. In the speech, he acknowledged that "my belief that governments serve the individual, and not the other way around, is shaped by America's story," which he summarized by recalling that the "promise of freedom that applied only to

[97] Barack Obama, "Remarks at a State Dinner Hosted by President Pranab Mukherjee of India in New Delhi, India," The American Presidency Project, January 25, 2015, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-state-dinner-hosted-president-pranab-mukherjee-india-new-delhi-india.

[98] Barack Obama, "Barack Obama's Berlin Speech – Full Text," *The Guardian*, June 19, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/19/barack-obama-berlin-speech-full-text.

[99] Gilmore, "Translating American Exceptionalism," 2429.

[100] Barack Obama, "Remarks with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan at Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima, Japan," The American Presidency Project, May 27, 2016, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-with-prime-minister-shinzo-abe-japan-hiroshima-peace-memorial-park-hiroshima-japan.

the few" was expanded over time in American history.[101] However, while he said that "my views are shaped by the specific experiences of America, [I] do not think this story is unique to America. Look at the transformation that's taken place in countries as different as Japan and Chile, Indonesia, Botswana. The countries that have succeeded are ones in which people feel they have a stake."[102] Although he defended democratic forms of government, and asserted that he was "not neutral in [the] contest" between authoritarianism and liberalism, he also acknowledged that "not every country in this hall is going to follow the same model of governance. I do not think that America can or should impose our system of government on other countries."[103] Finally, he argued that the "embrace of these principles [of liberty and equality and justice and fairness] as universal doesn't weaken my particular pride, my particular love for America, it strengthens it."[104]

Gilmore argues that his study, which shows that American presidents invoke exceptionalist ideas in speeches both to domestic and foreign audiences, but in distinct ways, "suggests that US presidents are aware of the fact that when they are addressing any audience anywhere, they are also potentially addressing every audience everywhere . . . in this increasingly globalized world."[105] He argues that presidents use rhetorical tactics like speaking in terms of mutual exceptionalism in their speeches abroad in order to satisfy domestic expectations. However, what is striking about Obama's international speeches is not how he found ways to invoke American exceptionalism in more tactful ways to placate those watching at home. Instead, what stands out is how willing he seemed to be to understate the

[101] Barack Obama, "Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City," The American Presidency Project, September 20, 2016, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-city-8.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Gilmore, "Translating American Exceptionalism."

uniqueness of the American story when addressing foreign audiences. In his comments in Strasbourg, in the wordplay praising India's prime minister, or in his remarks to the United Nations, he affirmed his belief in the American project but significantly qualified its exceptional nature, and stated explicitly that he did not think the story of increasing freedom was unique to America.

In their comparative study on exceptionalist foreign policy discourse in the United States, Turkey, China, and India, Nymalm and Plagemann found that exceptionalist discourses in different countries had in common that they were "informed by supposedly *universal* values derived from a *particular* civilization heritage or political history [emphasis in original]."[106] While this may be an accurate approximation when applied to Obama's domestic addresses, the reverse seems to be true when talking to international audiences. Rather than arguing that the United States' history lay the foundation for a world order based on universal liberal values, he instead framed the American story as but one example of many.

Summary

Barack Obama made frequent reference to American exceptionalism throughout his election campaigns and presidency. In extolling the virtues of the American character and story of progress, he often talked about historical examples and his own background and life story. In particular, he emphasized that the dualities present in American history, and embodied by his own biracial heritage, made the United States unique. Consistent with the traditional jeremiadic tradition, he argued that the responsibility for societal problems lay not solely in "Washington," but also in the mistakes of the American people at large. Obama

[106] Nicola Nymalm and Johannes Plagemann, "Comparative Exceptionalism: Universality and Particularity in Foreign Policy Discourses," *International Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (March 2019): 12, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viy008.

frequently employed metaphors with religious connotations in speaking about the relationship between the founding documents ("gifts") and the American people's continuing struggle to live up to the values they represent. Unlike Bercovitch's conception of the American jeremiad however, Obama emphasized that American progress was never a given, but a constant work in progress that required continuing effort.

In foreign policy, Obama argued in favor of American leadership, but also advocated a restrained approach to the use of military power. As the first president following the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, he was conscious of the wariness of the American people toward large-scale military action, in a fashion similar to the Cold War presidents' efforts to avoid "another Vietnam." In defending his plan for a military strike in Syria, he argued for America's responsibility to intervene in heavily qualified language. However, Obama still framed his approach in decidedly exceptionalist terms, arguing that the United States' unique leadership position necessitated adhering to international law and avoiding the creation of instability and new enemies.

Finally, despite the global media landscape of the 21st century, there was a marked difference between Obama's domestic addresses, in which he mostly followed convention in referring to the United States as unique and exceptional, and his addresses to international audiences, in which he understated the idea of American exceptionalism by including other supposedly exceptional nations, or forewent exceptionalist rhetoric altogether in favor of a more universal framework of increasing liberty and democracy, in which the United States was but one example.

Chapter 2 – Hillary Clinton

In August 2016, Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton delivered a speech on her views on American exceptionalism to the American Legion's national convention in Cincinnati, Ohio. "If there's one core belief that has guided and inspired me every step of the way," she said, "it is this: The United States is an exceptional nation. I believe we are still Lincoln's last, best hope of Earth. We're still Reagan's shining city on a hill. We're still Robert Kennedy's great, unselfish, compassionate country."[107] Calling the United States "the indispensable nation," she criticized her opponent Donald Trump for rejecting the idea of American exceptionalism and agreeing with Russian president Vladimir Putin that it was insulting to other countries. Referring to Trump's statement that "if you're in Russia, you don't want to hear that America is exceptional," Clinton answered: "Well maybe you don't want to hear it, but that doesn't mean it's not true."[108]

Although the stark contrast between Clinton's and Trump's views made American exceptionalism a major theme in the 2016 presidential campaign, the issue had also featured in various of Clinton's public statements as a presidential candidate in 2008, as secretary of state, and as a prominent member of the Democratic party leading up to the 2016 campaign. In this chapter, her rhetorical use of exceptionalist themes is analyzed. As will be seen, many of the elements of Obama's brand of American exceptionalism also featured prominently in Clinton's speeches and statements, but there are also key differences, in particular with regard to Clinton's statements on her view on America's role in the world.

[107] Daniel White, "Read Hillary Clinton's Speech Touting 'American Exceptionalism,'" *Time*, September 1, 2016, http://time.com/4474619/read-hillary-clinton-american-legion-speech/.

[108] Ibid.

American character

Like President Obama, Clinton frequently linked American greatness and exceptionalism to the character of the American people, encompassing the typical ideographic virtues identified by M. Karen Walker.[109] In her speech supporting Obama at the 2008 Democratic National Convention she said that "America's greatness is bound up in the lives of the American people – your hard work, your devotion to duty, your love for your children, and your determination to keep going, often in the face of enormous obstacles."[110] In her own acceptance speech in 2016 Clinton asserted: "We have the most dynamic and diverse people in the world . . . the most tolerant and generous young people we've ever had . . . the most innovative entrepreneurs."[111] Referring to Donald Trump's statement that "I alone can fix it," Clinton praised the "troops on the front lines, police officers and fire fighters who run toward danger, doctors and nurses who care for us, teachers who change lives, entrepreneurs who see possibilities in every problem. . . . He's forgetting every last one of us. Americans don't say: 'I alone can fix it.' We say: 'We'll fix it together.'"[112]

Although the virtues ascribed to the American people identified as exceptional by Obama and Clinton are similar, there is a substantial disparity regarding the jeremiadic elements present in their speeches. Whereas Obama would often talk about the Americans' struggles to live up to their promise in the first-person plural, warning citizens and politicians alike about such dangers as economic shortsightedness and decreasing democratic engagement, Clinton tended to place the blame more squarely on the shoulders of

[109] Walker, "Resolving Rhetorical Tensions."

[110] Hillary Clinton, "Transcript: Hillary Clinton's Prime-Time Speech," NPR.org, August 26, 2008, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94003143.

[111] Hillary Clinton, "Transcript: Hillary Clinton's Speech at the Democratic Convention," *New York Times*, July 28, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/29/us/politics/hillary-clinton-dnc-transcript.html.

[112] Ibid.

(Republican) politicians and big business. In her campaign launch speech for the 2016 election, she told the audience:

> The financial industry and many multi-national corporations have created huge wealth for a few by focusing too much on short-term profit and too little on long-term value. . . . Our political system is so paralyzed by gridlock and dysfunction that most Americans have lost confidence that anything can actually get done. And they've lost trust in the ability of both government and Big Business to change course.[113]

Although she would continue by saying that "we can blame historic forces beyond our control for some of this, but the choices we've made as a nation, leaders and citizens alike, have also played a big role," she did not elaborate further upon this point, and the only citizens she mentioned as deserving part of the blame were those in big business.[114]

The reference to the financial industry and big business is noteworthy. As Michael Kazin has pointed out, criticism of the "money power" has been an important feature of populist American rhetoric since the 1830s and Andrew Jackson. However, rather than calling for a rejection of capitalism, Kazin argues that using the "financial elite" as a scapegoat "offered the emerging mass public of small entrepreneurs, ambitious shopkeepers, and strapped wage earners a way to blame their misfortunes on a haughty, unelected cabal instead of on the economic system as a whole."[115] Indeed, he goes on to write that "to later generations of sufferers, this persistent demon, in the garb of 'Wall Street' and 'international bankers,' demonstrated that money . . . was not a symptom of deeper, structural ills but the problem itself. If insurgent politicians could throttle the barons of high finance, they need do

[113] Sam Frizell, "Read the Full Text of Hillary Clinton's Campaign Launch Speech," *Time*, June 13, 2015, http://time.com/3920332/transcript-full-text-hillary-clinton-campaign-launch/.

[114] Ibid.; Compare Clinton's criticism of the dysfunction in politics to Obama's warning about "[sitting] back and [blaming] the leaders we elect without examining our own role in electing them." Obama, "Farewell Address to the Nation from Chicago, Illinois."

[115] Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, Revised Edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 21.

little else."[116] The dynamic of defending existing capitalist structures while promising to rein in the excesses of the financial elite came to the fore in the rest of Clinton's 2016 campaign as well. For example, Clinton frequently used variants of the aphorism that "Wall Street should never be allowed to wreck Main Street again" in her primary debates against Bernie Sanders, but she was attacked by Sanders for the rest of her economic policy, such as her support of the Export-Import Bank of the United States, which he described as a form of "corporate welfare."[117] Despite their policy disagreements, both Clinton and Sanders made us of the populist framework of defending the middle class – a term that itself derives its meaning from the ideals of capitalism – against the financial and corporate elite. Appeals to the middle class are a hallmark of the rhetoric of American exceptionalism. As Jason A. Edwards has pointed out, focusing on the middle class "[taps] into an essential aspect of American political culture, the overarching myth and pursuit of the American dream."[118] From this perspective, framing the middle class and the financial elite as adversaries, even though both are products of capitalism, serves a dual purpose: it allows Clinton and other politicians to craft a populist message to everyday Americans upset with the perceived unfairness present in the economy, while simultaneously appealing to the powerful idea of the American dream.

Beside Wall Street, Clinton viewed (Republican) politicians as the biggest culprit preventing America from fulfilling its promise: "I haven't spent the past 35 years in the trenches . . . to see another Republican in the White House squander the promise of our

[116] Ibid.

[117] Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, "Democratic Candidates Debate in Milwaukee, Wisconsin," The American Presidency Project, February 11, 2016, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/democratic-candidates-debate-milwaukee-wisconsin; Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, "Democratic Candidates Debate in Flint, Michigan," The American Presidency Project, March 6, 2016, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/democratic-candidates-debate-flint-michigan.

[118] Edwards, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World*, 102.

country and the hopes of our people," she said during her speech at the 2008 Democratic convention.[119] "People are thinking about what is wrong with people in Washington that they can't make decisions, and they want the economy to grow again," she told *The Atlantic* in 2014 in talking about waning American confidence.[120] At the 2016 DNC, she said that "[Trump] is betting that the perils of today's world will blind us to its unlimited promise. . . . He wants us to fear the future and fear each other.[121] Quoting Franklin Roosevelt, she continued: "'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.' Now we are cleareyed about what our country is up against. But we are not afraid."[122]

The differences between the two most recent Democratic standard-bearers with regard to their view of the American character are not absolute. Obama too often contrasted the virtues of the American people with the impairments of (Republicans in) Washington and on Wall Street. One should also keep in mind differences in occasion and political goals: whereas Clinton's most relevant speeches on the exceptional American character were delivered on the campaign trail, which may have incentivized a more traditional oppositional approach, Obama's status as president may have offered him more opportunity to take a more reflective and jeremiadic position in which the causes of the troubles in American society could be sourced more equally in both citizens and politicians. Nevertheless, the differences are noteworthy.

As argued in the previous chapter, Obama's sustained social and self-criticism and his emphasis on the tenuous nature of American progress do not mesh with Bercovitch's view of the American jeremiad, in which an unshakeable faith in the American myth supplants the

[119] Clinton, "Transcript: Hillary Clinton's Prime-Time Speech."

[120] Goldberg, "Hillary Clinton: 'Failure' to Help Syrian Rebels Led to the Rise of ISIS."

[121] Clinton, "Transcript: Hillary Clinton's Speech at the Democratic Convention."

[122] Ibid.

narrative of declension typical of the traditional jeremiad.[123] Clinton too emphasized the uncertainty of American progress: "Just as with our founders, there are no guarantees. It truly is up to us," she told the Democratic National Convention in 2016.[124] More strikingly, the traditional jeremiadic element of lamentation over a people's failures is almost wholly absent from Clinton's rhetoric. While Obama would frequently point out that the root of political problems lay with the American people at large as much as with Washington, Clinton would seldom do so. According to Clinton's speeches, the problems of contemporary American society were caused not so much by a collective societal failure to live up to the American character and virtues, as would be expected in a traditional jeremiadic style. Instead, she pointed more emphatically to a small subset of Americans, i.e. politicians and the corporate and financial elite, as posing the most significant threat to American progress, while keeping the virtues of "ordinary Americans" firmly planted on their pedestal. For that reason, Clinton's rhetoric aligned more closely with Bercovitch's conception of the American jeremiad's celebratory tone than did Obama's.

American Journey

Like Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton framed her own life story as part of the American journey toward a more perfect union. While Obama would often emphasize the history of racial progress, Clinton reminded her audience at the 2008 Democratic National Convention of the struggle for women's suffrage. Here, too, the journey of American progress is inextricably tied to the exceptional virtues of the American character: "America is still around after 232 years because we have risen to the challenge of every new time,

[123] Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 7–8.

[124] Clinton, "Transcript: Hillary Clinton's Speech at the Democratic Convention."

changing to be faithful to our values of equal opportunity for all and the common good."[125] Blending the historical and the personal, she continued:

> And I know what that can mean for every man, woman, and child in America. I'm a United States Senator because in 1848 a group of courageous women and a few brave men gathered in Seneca Falls, New York, many traveling for days and nights, to participate in the first convention on women's rights in our history. And so dawned a struggle for the right to vote that would last 72 years, handed down by mother to daughter to granddaughter – and a few sons and grandsons along the way. . . . My mother was born before women could vote. But in this election my daughter got to vote for her mother for President. This is the story of America. Of women and men who defy the odds and never give up.[126]

In their content analysis of speeches made in the 2008 presidential campaign, Bligh et al. found that Clinton was less likely than Obama (and Republican candidates John McCain and Mitt Romney) to use language indicating a collective sense of mission.[127] They also found that Clinton's use of language on this topic decreased significantly after the New Hampshire primary. Instead, she was more likely to use language indicating similarity with her supporters and praising them.[128] As Bligh et al. pointed out, the New Hampshire primary (won by Clinton) was preceded by a highly publicized event during which Clinton teared up when asked how she managed to keep up with the campaign personally, a moment in which Clinton would later claim she found "[her] own voice."[129]

The findings by Bligh et al. suggest that Clinton made a conscious effort to craft a more personal campaign story after her success in New Hampshire. This may help to explain why Clinton's speeches on exceptionalist themes would often feature an emphasis on the American character and personal anecdotes, rather than on historical topics and documents

[125] Clinton, "Transcript: Hillary Clinton's Prime-Time Speech."

[126] Ibid.

[127] Michelle Bligh et al., "Finding Her Voice: Hillary Clinton's Rhetoric in the 2008 Presidential Campaign," *Women's Studies* 39 (October 18, 2010): 841, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2010.513316.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid., 824.

such as the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence, which featured prominently in Barack Obama's speeches. Obama's account of the American journey frequently took these documents and the ideas behind them as his starting point, telling a story about the Americans' struggle to have their character live up to the American ideals. Clinton, on the other hand, was more likely to start with praise of the American character and to take a personal approach to the journey theme, as when she told the story of her mother's rise from poverty during her speech launching her 2016 campaign:

> My mother taught me that everybody needs a chance and a champion. She knew what it was like not to have either one. Her own parents abandoned her, and by 14 she was out on her own, working as a housemaid. Years later, when I was old enough to understand, I asked what kept her going. You know what her answer was? Something very simple: Kindness from someone who believed she mattered. . . . And, because some people believed in her, she believed in me. That's why I believe with all my heart in America and in the potential of every American.[130]

Even when Clinton would invoke the Founders in her acceptance speech at the 2016 DNC, she would do so emphasizing their character and humanity: "We all know the story. But we usually focus on how it turned out – and not enough on how close that story came to never being written at all. . . . By the time they left Philadelphia they had begun to see themselves as one nation. That's what made it possible to stand up to a King. That took courage. They had courage."[131] Of course, the American character and the journey of American history are closely related in many conceptions of American exceptionalism. In many exceptionalist accounts, the unique American character was instrumental in creating the conditions for the creation of the United States, while others – most influentially Frederick

[130] Frizell, "Read the Full Text of Hillary Clinton's Campaign Launch Speech."

[131] Clinton, "Transcript: Hillary Clinton's Speech at the Democratic Convention."

Jackson Turner – have argued that America's geographical situation – the vast, so-called "virgin land" – and the US' westward expansion forged the American character.[132]

Overall, then, while Obama and Clinton at times may have emphasized different aspects of the American journey, their statements on this topic were largely similar and compatible. Both stressed the tenuous nature of American social and political progress, reliant on the exceptional American character. Both attempted to blend the personal and the political, and to present themselves and their campaigns as direct heirs of the American journey in general, and increasing racial and gender inclusiveness specifically. These similarities in points of view with regard to the domestic side of the American journey make the differences between the two politicians in the international arena even more striking.

America and the world

As the row over the United States' policy on Syria discussed in the introduction already hinted at, it is Clinton's vision of America's role in international affairs in which her version of exceptionalist ideas differed most substantially from Obama's. Although acknowledging the need for cooperation, Clinton consistently emphasized that the United States was the only country able to lead the world in solving global problems. In military matters, Clinton frequently defended the more traditionally interventionist strand of exceptionalist policy, instead of Obama's more restrained approach.

In July 2009, then-Secretary of State Clinton held a public conversation with Richard N. Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations think tank. During the event, she dismissed both the idea of declining American power and condemnations of American foreign policy:

[132] Edwards, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World*, 6; Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921).

> Now some see the rise of other nations and our economic troubles here at home as signs that American power has waned. Others simply don't trust us to lead. They view America as an unaccountable power, too quick to impose its will at the expense of their interests and our principles. But they are wrong. The question is not whether our nation can or should lead, but how it will lead in the 21st century.[133]

Alluding to an incident in which she had fractured her elbow the month before the event, Clinton went on to say:

> Liberty, democracy, justice, and opportunity underlie our priorities. Some accuse us of using these ideals to justify actions that contradict their very meaning. Others say we are too often condescending and imperialistic, seeking only to expand our power at the expense of others. And yes, these perceptions have fed anti-Americanism but they do not reflect who we are. No doubt we lost some ground in recent years but the damage is temporary. Kind of like my elbow -- it's getting better every day.[134]

Note how Clinton said that the negative *perceptions* of the United States had fostered anti-American sentiment, rather than actual acts or policies. Both Obama and Clinton emphasized the need for renewed American leadership. However, whereas the newly inaugurated Obama had used the present tense in his admission that "we're not always going to be right," and criticized the war in Iraq as part of a broader problem in American foreign policy, Clinton framed the damage caused to American leadership during the Bush administration as merely a temporary setback in executing an otherwise beneficent American foreign agenda.[135] While both had an obvious political interest in defending the US' international agenda as soon as they were shaping it themselves, Clinton's statements match more closely with the traditional interventionist conception of American exceptionalism, i.e. the ideas that the United States should take an active stance in solving or alleviating world problems, and that "the US role in the world is always performed with good intentions," as

[133] Richard N. Haass and Hillary Clinton, "A Conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton," Council on Foreign Relations, July 15, 2009, https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-us-secretary-state-hillary-rodham-clinton-1.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Obama, "The President's News Conference in Strasbourg"; Haass and Clinton, "A Conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton."

formulated by Jason A. Edwards in his study of Clinton's husband's foreign policy rhetoric.[136]

Like President Obama, Clinton stressed the importance of international cooperation throughout her public speeches, while emphasizing the importance of American leadership. However, while the president used more or less egalitarian language when speaking to a European audience in particular – as in his comments in Strasbourg – Clinton did not shy away from pointing out the differences she saw between the United States and the European nations. "I have never understood multiparty democracy," she said during her first visit to Europe as secretary of state.[137] "It is hard enough with two parties to come to any resolution, and I say this very respectfully, because I feel the same way about our own democracy, which has been around a lot longer than European democracy."[138] In her remarks at the Munich Security Conference in 2011, she said:

> This alliance of the Euro-Atlantic community has stood the test of time. And America has always, *even when Europe was not wholly free*, stood for the principle that free people govern themselves best [emphasis added]. I look out at this audience. I see presidents and prime ministers and foreign ministers from countries that were neither free nor truly secure not so long ago and who today are.[139]

During her own presidential campaign in 2016, Clinton reiterated the significance of America's exceptional leadership, and also compared the United States with other countries:

> When America fails to lead, we leave a vacuum that lets extremism take root, emboldens our adversaries and discourages our friends. Of course, this doesn't mean that people from other places don't also feel deep national pride—and other countries also have a responsibility to step up and help solve global problems. But America has

[136] Edwards, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World*, 6.

[137] David Brunnstrom, "Tongue-Tied Clinton Gets Warm EU Welcome," *Reuters*, March 6, 2009, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-clinton-gaffes/tongue-tied-clinton-gets-warm-eu-welcome-idUSTRE5253XS20090306.

[138] Ibid.

[139] Hillary Clinton, "Remarks at the Munich Security Conference Plenary Session," U.S. Department of State, February 5, 2011, https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/02/156044.htm.

> an unparalleled ability to be a force for peace, progress and prosperity around the world.[140]

Blending the exemplary and missionary views of American exceptionalism, and borrowing a phrase popularized by her husband's administration, she told the American Legion that America was "an indispensable nation. In fact . . . *the* indispensable nation [emphasis added]."[141] Calling it an "extraordinary blessing" to be American and pointing out that "so many people . . . want to be Americans too," she also argued that it was "a serious responsibility. The decisions we make and the actions we take, even the actions we don't take, affect millions, even billions of lives."[142]

Feminism

One particular area Clinton drew attention to during her time as secretary of state was that of women's rights and gender issues. Clinton framed these topics as issues of national security: "Women's equality is not just a moral issue, it's not just a humanitarian issue, it is not just a fairness issue; it is a security issue. It is a prosperity issue and it is a peace issue. . . . Give women equal rights, and entire nations are more stable and secure. Deny women equal rights, and the instability of nations is almost certain."[143] The idea of women's issues as a key national security concern became known as the Hillary Doctrine.[144]

In December 2011, Clinton delivered a speech at Georgetown University, marking the launch of a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security: "Now I know some of you may be thinking to yourself, 'Well, there she goes again. Hillary Clinton always talks about

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[140] Hillary Clinton, "Hillary Clinton: Why America Is Exceptional," *Time*, October 13, 2016, http://time.com/collection-post/4521509/2016-election-clinton-exceptionalism/.

[141] White, "Read Hillary Clinton's Speech Touting 'American Exceptionalism.'"

[142] Ibid.

[143] Hillary Clinton, "Remarks at the TEDWomen Conference," U.S. Department of State, December 8, 2010, https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/12/152670.htm.

[144] Valerie M. Hudson and Patricia Leidl, *The Hillary Doctrine: Sex and American Foreign Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2015).

women, and why should I or anyone else really care?' Well, you should care because this is not just a woman's issue. . . . It truly does cut to the heart of our national security and the security of people everywhere."[145] In her speech, Clinton emphasized the American leadership on these issues. Notably, she said:

> The United Nations is also making important progress, building on Resolution 1325 [on women, peace and security]. With strong U.S. support, the Security Council has already adopted four additional resolutions on women and security in just the past three years. And last month, the General Assembly's Third Committee adopted a new U.S.-led resolution to encourage greater political participation for women and an expanded role in making and keeping peace.[146]

In fact, the adoption of Resolution 1325 by the UN Security Council in 2000 preceded the launch of the National Action Plan by eleven years, and was advocated for by various parties other than the United States government.[147] As secretary of state, Clinton had obvious political reasons to emphasize America's role in advancing women's issues. However, she has been criticized for her approach. As early as 2001, prominent women's studies scholar Caren Kaplan observed that "one of the truly safe domains for Hillary Rodham Clinton's political activities has been the arena of 'global feminism' – the advocacy of mainstream, liberal Western feminist agendas on a global basis."[148] Kaplan warned that "cosmopolitanism is never neutral" and that "in the case of globalized feminist practices, recourse to cosmopolitanism is a troubling sign of links to the colonial discourses of the past."[149] More recently, Basuli Deb has argued that Clinton's 2011 speech at Georgetown, which she

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[145] Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Secretary Clinton's Remarks on Women, Peace, and Security," U.S. Department of State, December 19, 2011, https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/12/179173.htm.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Laura J. Shepherd, "Power and Authority in the Production of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325," *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 383–404, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2008.00506.x.

[148] Caren Kaplan, "Hillary Rodham Clinton's Orient: Cosmopolitan Travel and Global Feminist Subjects," *Meridians* 2, no. 1 (2001): 232.

[149] Ibid., 236.

categorized as an example of "typical imperial feminist benevolence," failed to acknowledge "the myriad sexual and gendered atrocities committed by the United States during the War on Terror in Iraq and Afghanistan."[150] Deb argues that Clinton reinforced Islamophobic and imperialist stereotypes by pointing out the problems faced by women in other countries, while omitting the sexual crimes for which the United States was responsible.

The term "imperial feminism" was also connected to Clinton in a 2016 essay by Zillah Eisenstein in *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*. According to Eisenstein, "imperial feminism is a feminism that operates on behalf of American empire building. It has a history of using the Western canon of 'women's rights' to justify American wars, most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq. . . . it declares itself the exceptional arbiter of women's needs. . . . Hillary Clinton has become the representation of and decoy for these politics."[151] Furthermore, Eisenstein charges, Clinton had achieved little to help women within the United States during her time in Washington.[152] "Before focusing on the lives of women and girls elsewhere," she suggests, "Clinton might rather direct her attention on the great deficits at home."[153]

It is beyond the scope and purpose of this chapter to judge the merits of these criticisms in full. Focusing on international rather than domestic women's issues could also be seen as in keeping with Clinton's role as secretary of state – in a speech delivered shortly after leaving office in 2013, she did acknowledge that "for too many American women . . .

[150] Basuli Deb, "Cutting across Imperial Feminisms toward Transnational Feminist Solidarities," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 13, no. 2 (June 10, 2016): 170.

[151] Zillah Eisenstein, "Hillary Clinton's Imperial Feminism," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs* 23 (2016): 52.

[152] Eisenstein, "Hillary Clinton's Imperial Feminism."

[153] Ibid., 54.

the American Dream remains elusive."[154] Nonetheless, her rhetoric as secretary of state as exemplified in the 2011 Georgetown speech was consistent with her overall American exceptionalist message in stressing the United States' unique leadership role, and depicting America as an unambivalent force for good in advancing women's issues.

Syria

As with President Obama, the crisis caused by the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS threw Clinton's vision on America's role in the international community into stark relief. In her 2014 interview with *The Atlantic*'s Jeffrey Goldberg, in between her tenure at the state department and her second run for president, she spoke of the "failure" to arm the Syrian opposition, and warned against an overly cautious foreign policy:

> JG: Is there a chance that President Obama overlearned the lessons of the previous administration? In other words, if the story of the Bush administration is one of overreach, is the story of the Obama administration one of underreach?
>
> HRC: You know, I don't think you can draw that conclusion. It's a very key question. How do you calibrate, that's the key issue. . . . You know, when you're down on yourself, and when you are hunkering down and pulling back, you're not going to make any better decisions than when you were aggressively, belligerently putting yourself forward. One issue is that we don't even tell our own story very well these days.
>
> JG: I think that defeating fascism and communism is a pretty big deal.
>
> HRC: That's how I feel! Maybe this is old-fashioned. Okay, I feel that this might be an old-fashioned idea—but I'm about to find out, in more ways than one. Great nations need organizing principles, and "Don't do stupid stuff" is not an organizing principle. It may be a necessary brake on the actions you might take in order to promote a vision.[155]

[154] Hillary Rodham Clinton, "2013 Women in the World Summit - April 5, 2013," Iowa State University Archives of Women's Political Communication, April 5, 2013, https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/09/2013-women-in-the-world-summit-april-5-2013/.

[155] Goldberg, "Hillary Clinton: 'Failure' to Help Syrian Rebels Led to the Rise of ISIS" Clinton's "I'm about to find out" comment is probably an allusion to her at that time yet to be announced presidential bid.

Privately, the president became "rip-shit angry" when hearing about Clinton's criticism of his "don't do stupid shit" message, according to senior Obama advisor Ben Rhodes: "The questions we were asking in the White House were 'Who exactly is in the stupid-shit caucus? Who is pro–stupid shit?'"[156] Although Clinton would quickly apologize publicly to the president, the episode seemed like a throwback to the 2008 primary contest between the two Democrats, in which Clinton's support for and Obama's opposition to the invasion of Iraq was one of the key themes.[157]

One year after her interview with *The Atlantic*, renewed presidential candidate Clinton gave a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations on her approach to stop ISIS. She emphasized the importance of an international approach, but also stressed the United States' indispensable leadership role: "This is a time for American leadership. No other country can rally the world to defeat ISIS and win the generational struggle against radical jihadism. Only the United States can mobilize common action on a global scale, and that's exactly what we need. The entire world must be part of this fight, but we must lead it."[158] In a 2016 opinion piece in *Time* magazine, Clinton blended exceptionalism and cooperation even more seamlessly: "America is also indispensable because of our network of alliances, built up with decades of diplomacy. Russia and China can't begin to compare."[159] However, despite her stated preference for multilateral solutions, the United States should still "be prepared to act decisively on our own [if necessary], just as we did it to bring Osama bin Laden to justice."[160]

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[156] Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/.

[157] Miller, "Hillary Clinton Wants to 'Hug It Out' With Obama."

[158] Ryan Teague Beckwith, "Read Hillary Clinton's Speech on Fighting ISIS," *Time*, November 19, 2015, http://time.com/4120295/hillary-clinton-foreign-policy-isis/.

[159] Clinton, "Hillary Clinton: Why America Is Exceptional."

[160] Beckwith, "Read Hillary Clinton's Speech on Fighting ISIS."

Both Obama and Clinton favored an active role for the United States in international affairs. Within the traditional framework of the exemplary and missionary strands of American exceptionalism, both would seem to subscribe to the latter.[161] However, the differences between the two politicians' rhetoric highlight the limitations of this approach. Simply concluding that both subscribed to the idea of indispensable American leadership obscures the differences in their proposed policy and the exceptionalist ideas used to defend it.

The most substantial alternative to the dichotomy between the two strands of exceptionalism has been produced by Hilde Restad, as discussed previously. Restad argues that the United States' foreign policy has not cycled between or developed from an exemplary, isolationist strand of thought and/to the missionary, interventionist one. Rather, Restad argues that America has had a more or less constant foreign policy tradition, which she dubs "unilateral internationalism, meaning that the United States has "always been internationalist . . . but has preferred to conduct its foreign policy in a unilateral, rather than multilateral, manner."[162] Unfortunately, this framework also seems too rigid. Certainly, both Obama and Clinton expressed a preference for multilateral solutions, and used exceptionalist terms in describing America's capability in leading international coalitions. In the absence of these coalitions, however, Obama used exceptionalist language about the United States' commitment to international norms and the rule of law to warn against unilateral action and so-called "stupid shit," while Clinton defended a more traditional view of the United States' capability to intervene successfully in crises such as the one in Syria, and stressed that the US had to be "prepared to act decisively on our own" if need be.[163] By emphasizing America's

[161] McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 2.

[162] Restad, *American Exceptionalism*, 3.

[163] Beckwith, "Read Hillary Clinton's Speech on Fighting ISIS."

unique leadership capability, Clinton reframed the United States' exceptional role as the indispensable head of international coalitions.[164]

Summary

Looking back at the three main themes discussed in this chapter, it is clear that Clinton's use of exceptionalist rhetoric features a number of similarities and differences compared to Barack Obama's. Both Democrats praised the exceptional nature of the American character and historical journey of progress in similar fashion, some differences in emphasis notwithstanding. Both also stressed the uncertain nature of American progress. The most significant difference in this regard is that the self-criticism of the American people typical in many of Obama's statements is almost wholly absent in Clinton's rhetoric, who instead took aim squarely at the politically conventional opponents in Washington and big business. Whereas Obama would frequently emphasize that those individuals who lived up to the American promise – such as the marchers in Selma – were often in the minority, and argued that American citizens were also partly responsible for the problems in the United States, the virtues of the American people were seldom doubted in Clinton's account.

With regard to the United States' role in the international community, both Obama and Clinton favored an active leadership role for the United States and a multilateral approach to foreign policy. Compared to the president, however, Clinton used more traditionally exceptionalist language in the missionary tradition to defend American intervention and leadership, was more forceful in her rejection of anti-imperial criticism of American foreign policy, was more likely to stress the differences between the United States

[164] Goldberg, "Hillary Clinton: 'Failure' to Help Syrian Rebels Led to the Rise of ISIS."

and its European allies, and did not share Obama's use of exceptionalist ideas about the United States' commitment to the rule of law to defend a restrained foreign policy.

Chapter 3 – Joe Biden

In July 2016, Vice President Joe Biden addressed a boisterous crowd at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia. In the early stages of his speech, before delivering a fiery condemnation of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, Biden noted that the occasion was a "bittersweet moment" for him and his family, after the death of his oldest son Beau in May of the previous year.[165] For Biden, speaking about coping with grief was all too familiar, having frequently told audiences the story of the death of his first wife Neilia and daughter Naomi when he was only thirty years old. However, at the 2016 convention, he gave his message a distinctly exceptionalist twist:

> As Ernest Hemingway once wrote, the world breaks everyone, and afterwards many are strong at the broken places. I've been made strong at the broken places. . . . But you know what, we talk about, we think about the countless thousands of other people, who suffered so much more than we have, with so much less support. So much less reason to go on. But they get up, every morning, every day. They put one foot in front of the other. They keep going. That's the unbreakable spirit of the people of America. That's who we are.[166]

Biden would then use his comments about resilience as a segue into a more general celebration of the American people. The 2016 convention speech illustrates Biden's highly personal approach to relating exceptionalist ideas. Like Hillary Clinton, Biden's account of the American character and American history was almost exclusively celebratory, with a special emphasis on the virtues of the American middle class. Like Barack Obama, and arguably even more so, Biden emphasized the limitations of the United States' capability to achieve its international goals through military power, and was willing to acknowledge that America did not always live up to its own moral standards. Finally, although he would frequently argue that the United States was in a unique position to prosper in the twenty-first

[165] Will Drabold, "Read Joe Biden's Speech at the Democratic Convention," *Time*, July 28, 2016, http://time.com/4426178/dnc-joe-biden-speech-transcript-video/.

[166] Ibid.

century, he would consistently understate the differences between the United States and other allied nations on the international stage.

American character

Like Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden regularly praised the virtues of the American character identified by M. Karen Walker as central to the exceptionalist rhetorical tradition, with a special emphasis on optimism, fairness and resilience.[167] Whereas the other two politicians would also use personal anecdotes as illustrations of the American character, neither did so as frequently or consistently as Biden, for whom the personal and the American were often rhetorically synonymous: "My mother's creed is the American creed," he told the 2008 Democratic National Convention: "No one is better than you. You are everyone's equal, and everyone is equal to you. My parents taught us to live our faith, and treasure our family. We learned the dignity of work, and we were told that anyone can make it if they try. That was America's promise."[168] In a speech delivered in the Rose Garden in 2015 to announce that he would not seek the presidency the next year, he reemphasized this belief in a quintessentially American optimism, and warned against national pessimism:

> And at our core, I've always believed that what sets America apart from every other nation is that we, ordinary Americans, believe in possibilities — unlimited possibilities. Possibilities for a kid growing up in a poor inner-city neighborhood, or a Spanish-speaking home, or a kid from Mayfield in Delaware, or Willow Grove in Pennsylvania –like Jill and I. To be able to be anything we want it to be; to do anything – anything – that we want, that's what we were both taught. That's what the president was taught. It was real. That's what I grew up believing. And, you know, it's always been true in this country. And if we ever lose that, we've lost something very special.[169]

[167] Walker, "Resolving Rhetorical Tensions."

[168] Joe Biden, "Transcript: Joe Biden's Acceptance Speech," NPR.org, August 27, 2008, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94048033.

[169] Joe Biden, "Transcript of Joe Biden's Remarks on Not Running for President," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2015, sec. Politics, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/22/us/politics/transcript-of-joe-bidens-remarks-on-not-running-for-president.html.

For Biden, the crucial source of his rhetorical optimism lay in the belief in a growing American middle class. As discussed in the previous chapter, appeals to the middle class and the American dream are a key element of the rhetoric of American exceptionalism. Using one of his most frequently repeated phrases, he told the 2016 Democratic National Convention, "I know I'm called middle class Joe and in Washington, that's not meant as a compliment. It means you're not sophisticated," before proceeding to tie the middle class ideal to the American dream:

> I know why we're strong. I know why we have held together. I know why, we are united. It's because there's always been a growing middle class. This guy [Donald Trump] doesn't have a clue about the middle class, not a clue. Because, folks, when the middle class does well, when the middle class does well, the rich do very well and the poor have hope. They have a way up. He has no clue about what makes America great.[170]

In tough circumstances, optimism went hand in hand with resilience. In 2012, Biden recalled Americans' responses to the recent recession: "we were hit hard. You saw – you saw your retirement accounts drained, the equity in your homes vanish, jobs lost or on the line. But what did you do as Americans? What you've always done – you didn't lose faith; you fought back. You didn't give up; you got up."[171] And in speaking about terrorism at Harvard's John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum in 2014, he reassured the audience that the American character would guide the United States to victory:

> And while we face an adaptive, resilient enemy, let's never forget that they're no match for an even more resilient and adaptive group of people, the American people, who are so much tougher, smarter, realistic and gutsy than their political leadership gives them credit for. We didn't crumble after 9/11. We didn't falter after the Boston

[170] Drabold, "Read Joe Biden's Speech at the Democratic Convention."

[171] Joe Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the Democratic National Convention," Archived Obama White House Website, September 6, 2012, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/06/remarks-vice-president-democratic-national-convention.

> Marathon. But we're America. Americans will never, ever stand down. We endure. We overcome. We own the finish line.[172]

Compared to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, Biden's account of the American character resembled the latter's more closely. Biden, like Clinton, was virtually always celebratory of the average American, and lacked the jeremiadic element of social critique that characterized some of Obama's most prominent addresses. Like Clinton, Biden mostly blamed opposing politicians and external factors for societal and political problems. Unlike Clinton, he did not usually place blame on representatives of big business. Indeed, after leaving office and while campaigning for other candidates in 2017 and 2018, Biden would say that "the wealthy are as patriotic as the poor," and that "I don't think 500 billionaires are the reason why we're in trouble."[173] Further examples of Biden laying blame on other, mostly Republican, politicians are explored in the following section.

The personal and the political: resilience

Biden's comments at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, quoted in the opening of this chapter, merit further consideration, in part because they present a rare opportunity to explore meaningfully the relationship between personal beliefs and political messaging. In 1972, shortly after Biden was first elected to the United States Senate, his first wife Neilia and his daughter Naomi were killed in a car accident. In 2015, Biden's oldest son Beau died of cancer aged 46, leading to Joe's decision not to seek the presidency in 2016.

[172] Joe Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the John F. Kennedy Forum," Archived Obama White House Website, October 3, 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/10/03/remarks-vice-president-john-f-kennedy-forum.

[173] Mallory Shelbourne, "Biden: Rich Are as Patriotic as the Poor," *The Hill*, October 3, 2017, https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/353673-biden-rich-are-as-patriotic-as-the-poor; David Smith, "Joe Biden: The Liberal Everyman Spoiling for a Fight with Trump as 2020 Looms," *The Guardian*, May 13, 2018, sec. US news, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/may/13/joe-biden-trump-2020-election.

Early in his political career, shortly after the accident, Biden understandably resented the focus on his personal tragedy by the press and his colleagues.[174] In more recent years however, Biden frequently recalled the incident when speaking to audiences about grief and resilience. He gave a vivid description of the events of 1972 and his struggle to cope with the loss of his wife and daughter in remarks made at a Memorial Day seminar held by the non-profit Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, before attempting to reassure the attendees:

> I probably shouldn't say this with the press here, but . . . it's more important – you're more important. For the first time in my life I understood how someone could consciously decide to commit suicide. Not because they were deranged, not because they were nuts; because they'd been to the top of the mountain and they just knew in their heart they'd never get there again. . . . There will come a day, I promise you, and your parents as well, when the thought of your son or daughter or your husband or wife brings a smile to your lips before it brings a tear to your eye. . . . The only thing I have more experience than you in is this: I'm telling you it will come.[175]

In September 2015, a few months after his son Beau's death, he told *Late Show* host Stephen Colbert:

> My dad said: No one owes you anything. It's just, you got to get up. And I feel like I was letting down Beau, letting down my parents, letting down my family, if I didn't just get up. You know. You just got to get up. Think of all the people you know, who are going through horrible things, and they put one foot in front of the other. And they don't have, like I said, anything like the support I have. I marvel at the ability of people to absorb hurt and just get back up.[176]

In an interview with the Jesuit *America* magazine, he repeated this message almost verbatim.[177] Of course, politicians often relate accounts of their own backstories and experiences in an attempt to show that they embody the same values that shape their political persona. What is interesting is that Biden did not suggest in any of these cases that this

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[174] Richard Ben Cramer, *What It Takes: The Way to the White House* (New York: Random House, 1992).

[175] Joe Biden, "Survivors of Fallen Military Members," C-SPAN, May 25, 2012, https://www.c-span.org/video/?306246-1/survivors-fallen-military-members.

[176] The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, *Vice President Joe Biden Interview, Part 1*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opVaEC_WxWs.

[177] Matt Malone, "'Everyone's Entitled To Dignity': A Conversation with Joseph R. Biden Jr.," *America Magazine*, September 29, 2015, https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/everyones-entitled-dignity.

specific capacity for resilience through grief was somehow uniquely American, even though he had referred to resilience as part of the American character in other contexts. At the 2016 Democratic National Convention however, he used similar language as in the Colbert and *America* interviews – people putting one foot in front of the other, with much less support than he had – but connected it directly to the "unbreakable spirit of America."[178] One could argue that the fact that Biden did not indicate in any of his previous statements that this capacity for resilience was typically American suggests that he was simply looking for a segue from the personal to the political in his speech at the convention.[179] On the other hand, one could read Biden's convention speech as a logical extension to his other frequent connections between personal values and the exceptional American character.

Biden's remarks seem novel not because he intimated that resilience was a key component of the exceptional American character, but because of his specific depiction of crisis and resilience. Typically, when American politicians talk about the people's capacity to overcome hardship, the emphasis is on the successful rebound, not on the crisis that preceded it. In addition, resilience is often treated in mostly abstract or depersonalized terms, such as when Clinton spoke about "[the American people's] determination to keep going, often in the face of enormous obstacles," or when Biden himself said that "we didn't crumble after 9/11. We didn't falter after the Boston Marathon. But we're America. Americans will never, ever stand down. We endure. We overcome. We own the finish line."[180] In these contexts, resilience can perhaps be best understood as an ideograph as defined by William Calvin McGee, that is "an ordinary-language term found in political discourse . . . a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined

[178] Drabold, "Read Joe Biden's Speech at the Democratic Convention."

[179] The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, *Vice President Joe Biden Interview, Part 1*.

[180] Clinton, "Transcript: Hillary Clinton's Prime-Time Speech"; Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the John F. Kennedy Forum."

normative goal."[181] Resilience in this sense becomes part of the optimistic ideology of the American dream and the unshakeable belief that no challenge is insurmountable.

Even though Biden also stressed the importance of "getting up and putting one foot in front of the other," his personal remarks on the topic are quite different from the abstract and depersonalized way in which the American people's resilience is usually presented in political rhetoric. Most significantly, Biden provided audiences with a deeply personal and visceral account of the crises preceding and necessitating resilience, even going so far as to share his thoughts on suicide in coping with the loss of his wife and daughter. By acknowledging rather than glossing over the impact of personal crises, he arguably added a personalized, therapeutic meaning to the normally abstract ideographic rhetoric of resilience and the American dream. In that sense it becomes understandable that Biden, who had always maintained that the personal and the political were strongly entwined, chose to rhetorically connect his personal message of resilience to the "unbreakable spirit of America" in his 2016 convention speech.[182]

American journey

As some of the passages quoted in the previous section show, Biden emphatically endorsed one of the hallmarks of American exceptionalist thought: the idea that the United States would endure indefinitely and would not be subject to the historically inevitable rise and fall of other great nations.[183] Indeed, Biden's optimistic view on the American people also extended to his account of the American journey. President Obama would often portray American history as the struggle of a people to live up to the ideals formulated in the

[181] Michael Calvin McGee, "The 'Ideograph': A Link between Rhetoric and Ideology," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (1980): 15, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638009383499.

[182] Drabold, "Read Joe Biden's Speech at the Democratic Convention."

[183] Edwards and Weiss, "Introduction: American Exceptionalism's Champions and Challengers," para. 1.

founding documents, pointing out that those who fought for social progress were not always popular or in the majority. Secretary Clinton, to a lesser extent, also emphasized the tenuous nature of American progress – although not the average American's imperfections. By contrast, Joe Biden presented the story of America in much more definitive and inevitable terms, both with regard to social progress and economic prosperity.

"The reason I'm optimistic is I know the history of the journey of this country, and it is always, always, always forward. Always better," Biden said in a 2014 commencement address at the University of Delaware.[184] He quoted the closing lines from William Butler Yeats' poem about the nationalist rising in Ireland in 1916, "All's changed, changed utterly. A terrible beauty has been born," before listing a number of promising recent and upcoming technological, economical and social developments.[185] The vice president even presented threats such as violent stateless actors and climate change as opportunities, because they were "bringing together civilized nations in a common cause to wipe them out" and "generating phenomenal breakthroughs and rapid growth in renewable energy," respectively.[186] By emphasizing areas of progress and opportunity, he also attempted to silence the so-called "declinists:" "The journey of hope is not yet finished, but we are on our way. And the cause of change is not fully accomplished, but we are on our way. So I say to you tonight with absolute confidence, America's best days are ahead, and, yes, we are on our way," he told the 2012 Democratic National Convention.[187] Even on this occasion, five years before "declinism" would culminate politically in Donald Trump's introduction of the phrase

[184] Joe Biden, "Commencement Address by Vice President Joe Biden," Archived Obama White House Website, May 31, 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/31/commencement-address-vice-president-joe-biden.

[185] Ibid. Coincidentally, Biden cited these lines in just under half of all of his speeches analyzed for the purposes of this study.

[186] Ibid.

[187] Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the Democratic National Convention."

"American carnage," Biden criticized the perceived pessimism of the Romney/Ryan ticket: "Folks, there's one more thing -- one more thing our Republican opponents are just dead wrong about: America is not in decline. America is not in decline."[188]

Of course, it made political sense in 2012 for Biden, representing the incumbent party and seeking reelection, to emphasize that America was on the right track and moving forward. As Gilmore et al. have found, American presidents have historically used exceptionalist rhetoric more frequently in times of economic recession, in an attempt to reassure the American people.[189] On different occasions, during the Obama administration's second term, Biden would warn about threats such as the erosion of the American dream and economic fairness. In a 2016 conversation at the Council on Foreign Relations, he argued that domestic support for America's leading role in an international order based on free trade would only be sustainable if the American people's economic concerns were answered:

> It all depends upon . . . whether or not we're going to . . . let people believe [in] the bargain that was established over in the late '30s, which was if you contributed to the profitability you worked with you got to share in the profits. . . . That is not happening today, for a whole range of reasons that are beyond your control. And I think we got to change it.[190]

These reasons, as Biden explained one year later in Davos, Switzerland, included processes of automation and globalization. "In my country, there used to be a basic bargain," he argued, but "today, that bargain is fractured."[191] Nevertheless, although Biden warned about the increasing struggles of the middle class, these comments were far outnumbered by proclamations of optimism. One indication that these did not simply fulfill the need to defend

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[188] Ibid.

[189] Gilmore, Sheets, and Rowling, "Make No Exception, Save One," 513.

[190] Joseph R. Biden and Richard N. Haass, "The Future of U.S. Foreign Policy: A Conversation With Vice President Joe Biden," Council on Foreign Relations, September 21, 2016, https://www.cfr.org/event/future-us-foreign-policy-conversation-vice-president-joe-biden.

[191] Joe Biden, "Joe Biden's Last Major Speech as Vice President in Full," World Economic Forum, 2017, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/joe-bidens-last-major-speech-in-full/.

the Obama administration's accomplishments can be found in similar passages in speeches from the 2008 presidential campaign, when the Democratic party did not yet control the White House. In his campaign announcement speech in early 2007, Biden heavily criticized the George W. Bush administration, arguing that Bush had "dug America into a very deep hole," but also stated that "the next century will be an American century."[192] At the 2008 convention, after having joined Barack Obama's presidential ticket, Biden told the audience that Obama had "tapped into the oldest American belief of all: We don't have to accept a situation we cannot bear. We have the power to change it."[193] By associating Obama with the "oldest American belief" about the capacity for change, Biden once more echoed the exceptionalist idea that the United States would not inevitably face eventual decline.[194]

In Biden's depiction of American progress and prosperity as inevitable, he mirrored most closely the element of the "promise of ultimate success" of the jeremiadic tradition as understood by Bercovitch and considered throughout this study.[195] Biden's depiction of the road to this ultimate success was almost wholly secularized. President Obama often presented his understanding of the American people's struggle to live up to the values laid out by the founders as a mirror image of the traditional understanding of the relationship between man and God, echoing the Declaration of Independence in speaking of "the God-given promise" of equality, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness.[196] By contrast, Biden, personally no less of a spiritual man than the president, would nevertheless use tellingly wordly imagery when talking about the American commitment to equality and fairness. In his address at Harvard's

[192] Joe Biden, "Biden Announcement," C-SPAN, January 31, 2007, https://www.c-span.org/video/?196507-1/biden-announcement.

[193] Biden, "Transcript: Joe Biden's Acceptance Speech."

[194] Edwards and Weiss, "Introduction: American Exceptionalism's Champions and Challengers," para. 1.

[195] Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 7.

[196] Barack Obama, "Inaugural Address," The American Presidency Project, January 20, 2009, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=44.

John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum in 2014, Biden said that the Chinese president Xi had asked him why the United States prioritized human rights so strongly. Biden told the audience that he answered that it would be "impossible" for any American president not to do so, "for the vast majority of the American people came here to seek human rights and freedom. It is *stamped into our DNA* [emphasis added]. . . . It is not a political tool. It is who we are."[197] In Biden's rhetoric, the American story was wholly a story of the American people, "ordinary people who can do extraordinary things."[198] Where Obama would often quote the founding documents, Biden – like Clinton – would rarely do so, and with far fewer religious connotations than the president often did, such as when the latter asserted that "while freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by His people here on earth."[199] Biden, on the other hand, downplayed the Declaration of Independence's religious language:

> America's strength ultimately lies in its people. There's nothing special about being American -- none of you can define for me what an American is. Can't define it based on religion, ethnicity, race, culture. The uniqueness of America is that we are a group of people who agreed on -- whether we say it, whether we're well-educated or not, whether we say it in terms of basic agreements but we really do believe without saying it, 'We the People.' 'All men are created equal, endowed by their Creator.' *Sounds corny* [emphasis added]. But that's who we are. That's the essential strength and vibrancy of this country.[200]

While Obama always called to mind the uneven, two-steps-forward-one-step-back nature of progress in American society, and Clinton also stressed to a lesser extent that the fulfillment of the American promise was not a given, Biden was the most unqualifiedly positive of the three about the state and future of American society. He would reiterate this optimism in comparing the United States with other countries, although he would do so differently at home and abroad.

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[197] Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the John F. Kennedy Forum."

[198] Biden and Haass, "The Future of U.S. Foreign Policy."

[199] Obama, "Inaugural Address," January 21, 2013.

[200] Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the John F. Kennedy Forum."

America and the World

In the 2014 study on the use of exceptionalist discourse at home and abroad, already discussed in the first chapter, Jason Gilmore found that US presidents communicated American exceptionalism in both domestic and foreign speeches, but in different ways.[201] Although the article focused solely on presidential discourse, it will be seen that the same point is true for many of Vice President Biden's addresses. At home, Biden would frequently point out the United States' unique advantages and enviable position, in an attempt to convey optimism and to silence the "declinists." When speaking abroad, however, he would emphasize the similarities between the United States and other countries. In both arenas, he argued for the need for America to stay engaged in international affairs, but warned audiences about the limitations of American power.

In his domestic addresses, Biden often argued that the United States was still in the best position to be the world's leading nation. "You're the ones, the American people . . . the reason why we are still better positioned than any country in the world to lead the 21st century," he told the 2012 Democratic National Convention.[202] He used variations of this statement frequently. "We are better positioned than any other nation in the world to remain the leading economy in the world," he said in his 2014 address at the JFK Jr. Forum, while in his commencement speech at the University of Delaware he told the students that the United States was in a position to lead "economically, politically and socially."[203] He emphatically rejected the idea that other countries were gaining a competitive edge over America. "We have the world's greatest research university. We have the greatest energy resources in the

[201] Gilmore, "Translating American Exceptionalism," 2416.

[202] Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the Democratic National Convention."

[203] Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the John F. Kennedy Forum"; Biden, "Commencement Address by Vice President Joe Biden."

world. We have the most flexible venture-capitalist system, the most productive workers in the world," he said in 2014.[204] In a conversation at the Council on Foreign Relations in 2016, he said: "Tell me, you want to trade places with any other [country]. . . . China doesn't have enough water–W-A-T-E-R. Not a joke. It's not a good thing, but they don't have enough water," before asking rhetorically: "We used to believe we could do anything, anything. I mean anything. What the hell's happened? Give me empirical evidence that we're not better positioned than any nation in the world."[205] At the 2016 Democratic National Convention, he asserted that "we are America, second to none. And we own the finish line. Don't forget it."[206]

Mutual exceptionalism

Internationally, Biden was much less emphatic in stressing the United States' unique position. Instead, he would make frequent use of a tactic Gilmore has termed "mutual exceptionalism," that is "[elevating] another country to the level of the United States so that both can be spoken about at an exceptional level."[207] Unlike Secretary Clinton, Biden did not mention the differences between the United States and Europe on occasions like the Munich Security Conference. Whereas Clinton had stressed the United States' commitment to liberty, "even when Europe was not wholly free," Biden consistently mentioned America's and Europe's efforts in the same breath.[208] "America and Europeans still look to one another before they look to anyone else," Biden confirmed in Munich in 2009. "Since I first attended this conference in 1980, together we have made remarkable strides toward the dream of a

[204] Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the John F. Kennedy Forum."

[205] Biden and Haass, "The Future of U.S. Foreign Policy."

[206] Drabold, "Read Joe Biden's Speech at the Democratic Convention."

[207] Gilmore, "Translating American Exceptionalism," 2429.

[208] Clinton, "Remarks at the Munich Security Conference Plenary Session."

Europe whole, free, and at peace," he said in 2015.[209] At the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, he reiterated this position, and although he did refer to the US as the "indispensable nation" in saying that he hoped the Trump administration would stay engaged in international affairs, his remarks otherwise strongly stressed the idea of "mutual exceptionalism":

> For the past seven decades, the choices we have made—particularly the United States and our allies in Europe—have steered our world down a clear path. After World War II, we drew a line under centuries of conflict and took steps to bend the arc of history in a more just direction. . . . Our careful attention to building and sustaining a liberal international order—with the United States and Europe at its core—was the bedrock of the success the world enjoyed in the second half of the 20th Century. . . . And it is my hope and expectation that the next President and Vice President, and our leaders in Congress, will ensure that the United States continues to fulfill our historic responsibility as the indispensable nation. But we have never been able to lead alone—not after World War II, not during the depths of the Cold War, and not today. The United States, our NATO allies, all the nations of Europe – we are in this together. As the oldest and the strongest democracies in the world, we have a responsibility to beat back the challenges at our door. We must never forget how we got here.[210]

Similar sentiments can be found in Biden's speeches addressing different allies and partners of the United States. At a 2016 trilateral meeting between the US, Japan, and South Korea in Hawaii, he broadened his usual statement about leadership in the new world: "I honest to God believe our nations are positioned to lead the 21st century."[211] Biden went on to praise the three countries' capacity and "track record that we're willing to take on difficult challenges," their "shared democratic values," and, exceptions notwithstanding, "shared vision for what the future should look like."[212] In a 2015 speech in Guatemala City, Biden

[209] Joe Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the Munich Security Conference," Archived Obama White House Website, February 7, 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/07/remarks-vice-president-munich-security-conference.

[210] Biden, "Joe Biden's Last Major Speech as Vice President in Full."

[211] Joe Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the US-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Meeting," Archived Obama White House Website, July 14, 2016, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/14/remarks-vice-president-us-japan-south-korea-trilateral-meeting.

[212] Ibid.

spoke extensively about the United States' capacity to assist Central American countries through financial and other means, but he was also careful to understate the notion of a hierarchical relationship: "We – the Obama administration and our Congress – believe the question is no longer: What can we do for the hemisphere? It's: What can we do with countries in the hemisphere together? We all have a role to play."[213]

Biden's emphasis on shared values fits with the findings by Nymalm and Plagemann discussed in the first chapter, who found that exceptionalist discourse often involves a sense of "supposedly universal values derived from a particular civilization heritage or political history."[214] It would appear to make sense to make note of shared, supposedly universal values as a prime vehicle to conjure a sense of mutual exceptionalism. The degree to which Biden was willing to use the first-person plural in talking about the "we" who held and propagated such values is still noteworthy, because it challenges the traditional assumption of American exceptionalist ideas about the United States as the singular most important champion of universal values.[215] In that regard, an argument can be made that Biden went further than Hillary Clinton in particular, whose vision of the liberal international order still featured the United States unmistakable at the head of the table, although the differences between the two were less pronounced in their domestic speeches than overseas. Compared to President Obama, Biden held up the framework of "mutual exceptionalism" more consistently, praising the work done by particular named countries and alliances, while Obama would more frequently suggest that their underlying values were in fact universally human.

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[213] Joe Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at a Plenary with Central American Leaders," Archived Obama White House Website, accessed July 5, 2018, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/node/324576.

[214] Nymalm and Plagemann, "Comparative Exceptionalism," 12.

[215] McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 11.

Limits of American power

Although Biden consistently presented the United States as an economic and political leader, he did warn audiences about the limitations of American power. As senator, Biden had held a mixed foreign policy record, including a vote in favor of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, although he would grow more critical of the war over time. In 2006, Biden and president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations Leslie H. Gelb proposed a plan in the *New York Times* for a decentralized Iraq and American troop withdrawal by 2008.[216] In his 2007 presidential campaign announcement video, he argued that the next president would have to act to "end our involvement in Iraq without further destabilizing the Middle East and the rest of the world."[217] Whereas the 2006 op-ed had solely focused on issues of national security and strategy, the 2007 announcement also made the point that "America's leadership among the world's nations is at stake."[218]

It is difficult to ascertain whether Biden's change in stance from the relatively hawkish wing of the Democratic Party to a more restrained position from 2007 onward should be seen as the result of lessons learned from the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as an adaptation to a changing political climate, as a stance taken in line with President Obama, or as a combination of all three. Nevertheless, it is clear that Biden, like the president, consistently emphasized the limits of American power throughout his vice presidency, and promoted what Ivie and Giner termed the "democratic attitude of interdependence" in their analysis of the Obama 2008 campaign.[219] "We must lead – but lead in a more rational way,"

[216] Leslie H. Gelb and Joseph R. Biden, "Unity Through Autonomy in Iraq," *The New York Times*, May 1, 2006, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/01/opinion/01biden.html.

[217] Biden, "Biden Announcement."

[218] Ibid.

[219] Ivie and Giner, "American Exceptionalism in a Democratic Idiom," 361.

Biden said at the JFK Jr. Forum.[220] Like the president, Biden used the example of the Middle East to warn against reckless military action. Talking about Syria and Iraq, he argued that the United States should keep up its coalition-building efforts in the region, but also that "ultimately, societies have to solve their own problems," saying that "we can't solve each of these problems alone. We can't solve them ourselves."[221] In his 2015 speech from the Rose Garden, Biden stated that the "decade of large-scale, open-ended military invasions" had taught America that "the argument that we just have to do something when bad people do bad things isn't good enough."[222]

The next year, at the Council on Foreign Relations, he spoke extensively about the question whether or not the United States had not reduced its presence in the Middle East too much. Saying that at the start of the Obama administration America's "judgement was being questioned by our friends as well as our foes," he emphasized that "it was important that we reestablish not only the example of our power, but the power of our example."[223] Ganea has argued that Obama's use of egalitarian, democratic language should be considered as a "recasting" of the ideology of exceptionalism, reinforcing "America's position as the main agent in international politics."[224] In the case of the vice president at least, the evidence does not seem to support a similar conclusion. Rather than simply remodeling America's dominant international position, Biden expressed the wish for other countries to step up precisely so the United States could take on a diminished role in solving regional problems. According to Biden, efforts in strengthening international alliances were necessary "with the hope that

[220] Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the John F. Kennedy Forum."

[221] Ibid.

[222] Biden, "Transcript of Joe Biden's Remarks on Not Running for President."

[223] Biden and Haass, "The Future of U.S. Foreign Policy."

[224] Marcela Ganea, "Rhetoric of Exceptionalism in the American Public Discourse of the 21st Century," *Res Rhetorica*, no. 3 (March 2016): 25.

some of the burden would be lifted from us, because . . . we need a real strong dose of humility about the capacity of us to fundamentally alter circumstances around the world."[225] Subsequently, Biden was asked whether historians might judge that the Obama administration had overcorrected for its predecessor's mistakes by not using military force in Syria – just like Hillary Clinton had been asked in her interview with *The Atlantic*'s Jeffrey Goldberg two years earlier. Biden prefaced his answer by saying: "I'm going to choose my words careful [sic] here because I still have a V in front of my name."[226] Despite this disclaimer, he appeared to criticize his boss's infamous statement that the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime would cross a "red line," while agreeing with the president's decision not to use military force: [227]

> Look, I am not a big fan of red lines. I am not a proponent of laying down markers unless you've thought through the second, third and fourth step that you're going to have to take and almost assuredly will have to take in order to accomplish your initial goal. . . . And so I don't think, had we – had we decided to use significant force, meaning – now, we can easily say we should have bombed and gone in and taken out their air defense system and we should have – well, you know, big nations can't bluff. You do that, then what's the next step? What's the next step you do? Because you know what's going to happen. What's going to happen is exactly what was happening anyway. . . . And I'm not just defending my president. I don't think there was any clear path for a significant use of military force. [228]

Overseas, Biden also stressed the United States' imperfections and limited capability to solve problems through force. In Europe, Biden echoed President Obama in using the present and future tense in acknowledging America's capacity for mistakes, telling the leaders gathered at the Munich Security Conference in 2009 that "as hard as we try, I know – I know – that we're likely to fall short of our ideals in the future, just as we have in the past.

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[225] Biden and Haass, "The Future of U.S. Foreign Policy."

[226] Ibid.

[227] Barack Obama, "Barack Obama: Remarks and an Exchange With Reporters Following a Press Briefing by White House Press Secretary James F. 'Jay' Carney," August 20, 2012, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=101939.

[228] Biden and Haass, "The Future of U.S. Foreign Policy."

But I commit to you, this administration will strive every day – every day – to honor the values that animate American democracy and, I might add, that bind us to all of you in this room."[229] Eight years later, in his last major address as vice president, he also reflected upon America's role in international affairs at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos: "The United States has not always been the perfect guardian of our order. We have not always lived up to our own values—and *some of our past missteps provided fodder for the forces of illiberalism* [emphasis added]. But President Obama and I have worked consistently over the past eight years to lead not only by the example of our power—but by the power of our example."[230] Biden saying that "our past missteps provided fodder for . . . illiberalism" provides an obvious contrast between him and Secretary Clinton, who said that negative *perceptions* of the United States had "fed anti-Americanism."[231] From the same podia, Biden also stressed that the United States could not bear the burden of leadership alone. At the 2015 Munich conference, he stated that "NATO is not a self-sustaining organization," calling upon members to meet their funding commitment, saying that "I realize not all can do it now. But it's a shared security, and shared security requires shared responsibility," echoing a statement he had made at the same conference in 2009 with regard to the issue of relocating prisoners out of Guantanamo Bay.[232] In Davos, before the impending inauguration of Donald Trump as president, he told the audience that "the challenges we face and the choices we must make as an international community do not hinge exclusively on Washington's leadership," and that "whether we reinforce the ties that

[229] Joe Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the 45th Munich Conference on Security Policy," The American Presidency Project, February 7, 2009, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=123108. Note yet another expression of mutual exceptionalism through shared values.

[230] Biden, "Joe Biden's Last Major Speech as Vice President in Full."

[231] Ibid.; Haass and Clinton, "A Conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton."

[232] Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the Munich Security Conference"; Biden, "Remarks by the Vice President at the 45th Munich Conference on Security Policy."

bind us, or whether we unravel under current pressures – those choices must be made in every nation."[233]

In one sense, the differences between Biden's rhetoric on the United States' exceptional position and role in the world while addressing domestic and international audiences fit with Gilmore's findings about similar differences in exceptionalist presidential rhetoric. Nonetheless, the results are striking, especially in a mass media environment in which officials, as Gilmore puts it, "when they are addressing any audience anywhere, [are] also potentially addressing every audience everywhere."[234] Because of this reality, it might be expected that politicians would attempt to craft a singular balanced message palatable for domestic and global audiences alike, as perhaps President Obama attempted during his early infamous press conference in Strasbourg. In Biden's case, however, there was still a clear dividing line between domestic addresses, focusing on the United States' unique position, and international speeches, emphasizing shared values and responsibilities in a consistently egalitarian manner.

Summary

With regard to American exceptionalism, an analysis of Joe Biden's rhetoric as vice president shows markedly mixed results. On the domestic front, Biden was the most uncompromisingly exceptionalist of the three Democrats considered in this study. Like Clinton, Biden praised the American people without the critical moments of reflection that characterized Obama's major speeches. Biden's highly personalized approach to the celebration of the American character also extended to his optimism about the American people's future of prosperity and leadership, expressed in more emphatic and certain terms

[233] Biden, "Joe Biden's Last Major Speech as Vice President in Full."

[234] Gilmore, "Translating American Exceptionalism," 2431.

than either Obama or Clinton used. Internationally, however, Biden used his vice presidency to promote a message of shared responsibility in light of America's inability to solve the world's problems, in particular by warning against the use of military force in the absence of clear and realistic objectives, in language similar to that used by the president. Finally, Biden, who emphatically endorsed America's unique advantages and leadership position at home, would consistently use the theme of "mutual exceptionalism" to understate the differences between the United States and other countries when speaking abroad.

Conclusion

Considering the analysis developed in the previous chapters, it becomes clear that the incident outlined in the introduction, over Hillary Clinton's criticism of Barack Obama's "don't do stupid shit" foreign policy mantra, is unlikely to have been a fluke, a momentary misunderstanding between people substantially in agreement with one another. Instead, it showed that the differences between their conceptions of the United States' supposed unique role in the world did not dissolve after the 2008 primary campaign. Indeed, although Obama, Clinton, and Joe Biden were three key pillars of the same administration, their rhetorical use of the ideas associated with American exceptionalism showed several subtle and not-so-subtle differences, in addition to numerous similarities. The most significant of these are summarized here.

American character and journey

With regard to their conceptions of the character of the American people and the history of the American journey, there are many similarities in the rhetoric used by all three Democrats. Obama, Clinton, and Biden all framed certain values and attitudes as distinctly American, emphasizing traits such as fairness, resilience, effort, and dignity, even if they tended to use different examples – Obama often called into memory historical examples of American ingenuity and industry, while Clinton and Biden gravitated more toward the examples of "ordinary Americans" in the present day. Each also presented American history as a story of progress toward a more perfect union, and rejected the view that the United States' best days were behind it and that America was in decline. Each used their personal background to portray themselves as part of that American journey. Obama and Clinton referred frequently to the imperfect but significant steps toward racial and gender equality, and Biden characterized his own middle-class upbringing as quintessentially American.

Despite this significant overlap, there are differences both in substance and emphasis. Perhaps most notably, Clinton and Biden presented a more fully celebratory view on the American people. In their accounts, problems in American society were almost always caused by dysfunctional politics, excesses of big business, or external forces and developments. By contrast, Obama offered a more nuanced account. At various times during his presidency, he noted that the American people did not always live up to the ideals set out in the founding documents. In his farewell address, he decried "[sitting] back and [blaming] the leaders we elect without examining our own role in electing them."[235] In Selma, he claimed that the civil rights marchers of the 1960s embodied American ideals, but also pointed out the significant opposition to their efforts, and added that "loving this country requires more than singing its praises or avoiding uncomfortable truths."[236]

Of course, this is not to say that Clinton and Biden were unaware of those uncomfortable truths. Indeed, they were not, as evidenced by their own accounts of progress toward justice over time. All three would agree that America was great precisely because of the possibility of progress. However, there is a marked difference in rhetorical emphasis. Biden and Clinton tended to depict the American people as unequivocally good, only held back by certain "un-American" influences, most of which came from divisive politics in Washington. "Given a fair chance, Americans have never, ever, ever, ever let their country down," said Biden at the 2016 DNC.[237] Although Obama also expressed his belief in the American people, and also castigated his (Republican) political opponents, he frequently made it a point to stress the complexity of societal tensions, and the uneven nature of

[235] Obama, "Farewell Address to the Nation from Chicago, Illinois."

[236] Rhodan, "Transcript: Read Full Text of President Barack Obama's Speech in Selma."

[237] Drabold, "Read Joe Biden's Speech at the Democratic Convention."

progress. In 2008, he spoke of a "a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years."[238] In Selma in 2015, he said that to "deny [civil rights] progress . . . would be to rob us of our own agency," but immediately added that "a more common mistake is to suggest that racism is banished."[239] In his farewell address in 2017, he said that "for every two steps forward, it often feels we take one step back."[240]

Throughout this study, these nuances have also been understood through the lens of the American jeremiad as understood by Sacvan Bercovitch.[241] As detailed in the first chapter, Bercovitch distinguished between the "traditional" jeremiad, in which speakers decried the forsakenness of their audience and prophesied God's impending punishment, and the typically American version of the genre, in which the uniqueness of the American project and the inevitability of its success were emphasized. The rhetoric used by Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton is mostly consistent with this latter conception. Both conveyed an unqualified sense of optimism – even if Biden did so with somewhat more certainty than Clinton – and stressed the United States' history of social progress. More importantly, they both pointed to (Republican) politicians in Washington and the Wall Street elite as the source of problems in American society, and rarely if ever acknowledged the imperfections of the American people as a group.

By contrast, Obama's rhetoric can be considered something of a hybrid between the more traditional and the typically American jeremiadic styles. Although certainly optimistic and celebratory, his speeches offered a more nuanced view of American progress, acknowledging that social progress was often uneven, and that the American people, not just

[238] Obama, "Address at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia: 'A More Perfect Union.'"

[239] Rhodan, "Transcript: Read Full Text of President Barack Obama's Speech in Selma."

[240] Obama, "Farewell Address to the Nation from Chicago, Illinois."

[241] Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*.

politicians, needed to keep up their efforts to live up to the values enshrined in the founding documents. Furthermore, he stated most clearly that although the United States still held unique promise, the fulfilment thereof was not guaranteed, challenging the typically exceptionalist belief that indefinite American success was all but inevitable.[242] If the Biblical Jeremiah castigated the Israelites for breaking their covenant with God, Obama warned the American people about weakening "the sacred ties that make us one," and stressed that the truths laid out in the Declaration of Independence "may be self-evident, [but] they have never been self-executing; [while] freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by His people here on Earth."[243]

America and the world

If Obama was the most distinctive of the three Democrats studied in his statements on the American character and domestic journey, it was Hillary Clinton whose rhetoric stood out when comparing the United States to other countries and in matters of foreign policy. Although Clinton, Obama, and Biden all used familiar exceptionalist tropes in talking about America's unique leadership position in their domestic statements, Clinton was much more willing to take a similar message abroad than either Obama or Biden. In addition, while Obama and Biden attempted to reframe American exceptionalism to defend a restrained approach in military matters, in light of the open-ended wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Clinton offered a more traditionally interventionist view of America's global responsibilities.

Although Gilmore has pointed out that US presidents (and by extension, other senior officials) are now aware that "when they are addressing any audience anywhere, they are also potentially addressing every audience everywhere," there remain striking differences between

[242] McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 7.

[243] Obama, "Farewell Address to the Nation from Chicago, Illinois"; Obama, "Inaugural Address," January 21, 2013.

politicians' statements about America's place in the world when speaking at home or abroad.[244] Domestically, the politicians' studied here regularly invoked the familiar language of American exceptionalism, for example by calling the United States "the indispensable nation" or by telling audiences that life stories such as Obama's "could only happen in America." When speaking to foreign audiences however, the three Democrats modified their rhetoric to varying degrees.

Clinton remained most consistent. Although she called for international cooperation, she did not shy away from pointing out the differences she saw between the United States and its allies, even when speaking on the international stage. Biden made the most use of the rhetorical strategy of "mutual exceptionalism" as understood by Gilmore, portraying the United States and its allies as equal partners in creating and maintaining the liberal international order.[245] Obama's rhetoric resembled Biden's, but at times the president also downplayed the idea of national exceptionalism altogether, pointing out that the story of people striving toward greater freedom was not unique to the United States.

Foreign policy

It was in discussing foreign policy that the rhetorical differences between Obama and Biden on the one hand and Clinton on the other were most pronounced, and arguably most significant. In general terms, all three expressed a preference for international cooperation and multilateral solutions to global challenges. Beyond that, the dissimilarities were stark.

Hillary Clinton's foreign policy rhetoric echoed most closely what Hilde Restad has termed "unilateral internationalism."[246] Clinton, like Obama and Biden, spoke regularly of

[244] Gilmore, "Translating American Exceptionalism," 2431.

[245] Ibid., 2429.

[246] Restad, "Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science," 57.

the importance of international cooperation, and indeed called to mind America's capability for building and leading coalitions in differentiating the exceptional United States from countries like Russia or China.[247] Nevertheless, she most emphatically defended the United States' right and responsibility to act on its own. In addition, she did not acknowledge criticisms of America's foreign policy – past or present – as valid, instead characterizing them as misconceptions that did not reflect the truth about America's benevolent role in world history. Finally, she warned against what she perceived to be an overly cautious approach to foreign policy, arguing that the United States' unique position of power entailed the responsibility to intervene decisively in crises such as the civil war in Syria.

By contrast, both Barack Obama and Joe Biden called for restraint in the use of American military force, especially unilaterally. Obama argued that it was precisely America's exceptional position in the world that obligated the US to adhere to international law and norms, although he did concede that unilateral military action was warranted when the US' "core interests" were at stake and there was no other alternative.[248] Both Obama and Biden emphasized that America could not solve all the world's problems, with the latter saying that "the argument that we just have to do something when bad people do bad things isn't good enough."[249] Tellingly, even when Obama did advocate intervention in Syria through targeted missile strikes, he described America's responsibilities as world leader in heavily qualified terms, and made national security, not moral obligation, the primary focus of his argument. In addition, Obama and Biden were more willing than Clinton to admit that the United States had made costly foreign policy mistakes in the past, and was not always going to be right in the future.

[247] Clinton, "Hillary Clinton: Why America Is Exceptional."

[248] Obama, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony."

[249] Biden, "Transcript of Joe Biden's Remarks on Not Running for President."

Should the wars in Afghanistan and particularly Iraq be considered as 21st-century analogies to the war in Vietnam with respect to their impact on the rhetoric of American exceptionalism? It may well be too soon to tell. In his analysis of post-Vietnam rhetoric, Trevor McCrisken concluded that although the legacy of Vietnam had forced later presidents to carefully address questions about the scope and duration of future military engagements, the belief in exceptionalism ultimately prevailed, and continued to give political legitimacy to strategic decisions to intervene in various conflicts. Speeches such as Obama's address to the nation in calling for a missile strike in Syria clearly show a similar tightrope-like dynamic in balancing between an appeal to American exceptionalism while also assuring the American people that the intervention would not be the start of another costly military operation. It remains to be seen if the wars of the early 21st century may have a more lasting impact on American political willingness to enter into large-scale military conflicts.

It may prove useful in this conclusion to briefly compare the foreign policy rhetoric of the Obama administration to that of the Clinton administration, the previous period in which the Democratic Party controlled the executive branch of the United States government. Jason A. Edwards' study of President Clinton's foreign policy rhetoric shows that there were certain similarities between Clinton and Obama. For instance, Edwards points out that Clinton developed a "confessional foreign policy," fitting within a larger tendency in the 1990s whereby various countries "expressed regret for historical transgressions."[250] In addition, Clinton recognized that although the United States was exceptional, its power was not unlimited.[251] The acknowledgement of America's past sins and finite power also featured prominently in Barack Obama's and Joe Biden's rhetoric, but less so in Hillary Clinton's.

[250] Edwards, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World*, 145.

[251] Ibid., 150.

There is a clear difference as well. Edwards described that the post-Cold War world enabled a new rationale to legitimize military intervention. While the Cold War presidents primarily used "defensive language" to argue for intervention, concerned with protection of US interests and containment of communism, the 1990s saw a new "offensive logic" of intervention based on the creation of order, neutralizing "rogue states and/or their leaders," and alleviating humanitarian crises.[252] Edwards argues that "Clinton's justifications for the use of force corresponded in many ways to this new offensive logic. . . . The president couched his reasons for intervention primarily in human based interests and not vital national interests."[253] Over time, Clinton, and his successor George W. Bush, would "[combine] both humanitarian and national interests to rationalize the use of force," he concludes.[254]

Although the breadth of the Obama administration's foreign policy rhetoric could be analyzed more fully than has been done in the present study, it appears warranted to point out something of a reversion from this "offensive logic" of intervention back to a more cautionary, defensive position. It is telling that even though President Assad's use of chemical weapons on his own citizens in Syria represented a serious humanitarian crisis, President Obama emphasized that he had concluded that it was "in the national security interests of the United States to respond . . . through a targeted military strike," arguing that a reaction was necessary to avoid the proliferation and eventual use of chemical weapons against the United States.[255] In the war-weary United States of the post-Bush era, national security concerns were once again dominant over humanitarian arguments in justifying military intervention. At least for Obama and Biden, this corresponded with a version of

[252] Ibid., 142.

[253] Ibid., 143.

[254] Ibid., 144.

[255] Obama, "Obama Syria Speech."

American exceptionalism in which the United States' status entailed a responsibility to live by the norms it expected other nations to follow and to not create more global instability through reckless action. Somewhat ironically – or rather, showing the nuances present in each of these claims – Joe Biden would frequently recall a phrase that Bill Clinton had used at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, arguing that "people the world over have always been more impressed by the power of our example than by the example of our power."[256] Hillary Clinton meanwhile remained more convinced of America's capability to use its military power effectively and for good, and emphasized that conviction.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to serve two main aims. First, it has been an attempt to analyze the way in which senior figures in the Democratic Party have dealt with the idea and legacy of American exceptionalism during the period of the Obama administration. For each of the politicians considered here, exceptionalist ideas, doctrines, and imagery played a key role in their political rhetoric. Few of those ideas were entirely new. Instead, events such as the election of the first black president, the reignition of social tensions and racial violence, an economic crisis unparalleled since the second world war, a war-weary nation and a novel and evolving geopolitical situation caused some rhetorical themes of exceptionalism to be continued, while others were resurfaced or reimagined. In other words, Obama, Biden, and Clinton all remained committed to the "para-ideology" of exceptionalism as a as described by McEvoy-Levy, the set of ideas used to create a "climate of belief" that enables support for particular policies.[257]

[256] Bill Clinton, "Transcript: Bill Clinton's Prime-Time Speech," NPR.org, August 27, 2008, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94045962; Drabold, "Read Joe Biden's Speech at the Democratic Convention."

[257] McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism*, 3.

However, the present study has also attempted to show that while all three Democrats expressed what made the United States exceptional and what responsibilities this status did or did not entail, they each did so in their own distinctive way. Sometimes, the differences were dramatic and obvious. More often, they showed in the nuances and subtleties of rhetorical emphasis or phrasing. There has been a tendency in the literature on the rhetoric of American exceptionalism to focus mostly or exclusively on the presidency, or on the contrast between the two major parties in American politics. If part of the relevance of studying exceptionalism lies in its role in shaping social and political discourse, this study shows that it is fruitful also to consider individual differences between different highly visible senior government officials, even within the same party.

Of course, although the scope of this study was broad in some respects, going beyond the presidency and covering a range of issues both domestic and international related to American exceptionalism, it was narrow in others, considering only one side of the political aisle, and making limited comparisons between the Obama administration and its predecessors. Many of the topics addressed here, such as the unifying portrayals of domestic history or non-military foreign policy issues, could easily be expanded upon. In addition, it remains useful to make interparty comparisons concerning the use of American exceptionalist rhetoric. Finally, the quantitative approaches taken in some recent studies can help to understand the rhetoric of American exceptionalism in a different way, by using speech databases to tally how often certain officials invoke particular ideas.

In some ways, the presidential election of 2016 can be partly understood as a referendum on the rhetoric of American exceptionalism, with Hillary Clinton's internationalist argument about the United States' continuing responsibilities as a global leader countered by Donald Trump's "America First" vision of the United States as but one country among many, forced to fend for itself and expecting other countries to do the same.

Although polls since 2014 have shown a steady decrease in the percentage of people saying they are "extremely proud" to be Americans, a majority of Americans still believe that the United States either "stands above all other countries in the world" or is "one of [the] greatest countries, along with others."[258] Recent history suggests that although the rhetoric of American exceptionalism may take different shapes in different periods of American political history, the concept itself is exceptionally resilient.

[258] Jeffrey M. Jones, "In U.S., Record-Low 47% Extremely Proud to Be Americans," Gallup.com, July 2, 2018, https://news.gallup.com/poll/236420/record-low-extremely-proud-americans.aspx; Laura Thorsett and Jocelyn Kiley, "Most Americans Say the U.S. Is among the Greatest Countries in the World," Pew Research Center, June 30, 2017, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/30/most-americans-say-the-u-s-is-among-the-greatest-countries-in-the-world/.

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