

ABSTRACT:

American Exceptionalism Throughout United States History

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In recent times, American Exceptionalism has become a major issue in United States elections, in particular the 2012 presidential election. In general terms, American Exceptionalism is the idea that there is something inherently different about the United States of America that distinguishes it from the rest of the world. Each time period has an expression of this concept. Beginning with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there are two prime examples: John Winthrop's "City Upon a Hill" and Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. This is followed by the nineteenth century, where the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny shows a distinct belief that the United States has a mission to help the wider world. This mission carries on into the twentieth century where World War I, World War II and the Cold War are fought to "make the world safe for democracy." No matter the time period, American Exceptionalism is a present force in the United States.

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AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM THROUGHOUT UNITED STATES HISTORY

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CHAPTER ONE

What is American Exceptionalism?

When thinking about what it means to be an American there are several ideas that come to mind: nationalism, patriotism, independence, democracy, and so many others. But it is hard to put into words exactly what the American Spirit is. That uniqueness that separates not only the United States as a whole, but the people as well, from the rest of the world. The best way to describe this abstract idea is through the concept of American Exceptionalism. American Exceptionalism is not the idea that the United States is better than the rest of the world but rather the idea that there is something inherently different that separates the United States and the rest of the world. This idea is not limited to just one area of American life; there are examples historically, politically, economically, religiously, socially, and more. It gives Americans a sense of self, a bond to their country, a bond to the ideas upon which the nation was founded. It also affects how citizens of the United States see themselves in context to the wider world. That uniqueness and difference has given Americans a sense of purpose/mission that has changed and developed over time.

The first reference to the United States as an exceptional nation comes from Alexis de Tocqueville. In his book *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville reflects on the system of the United States and concludes:

The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one. Their strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusively commercial habits, even the country

they inhabit, which seems to divert their minds from the pursuit of science, literature, and the arts, the proximity of Europe, which allows them to neglect these pursuits without relapsing into barbarism, a thousand special causes, of which I have only been able to point out the most important, have singularly concurred to fix the mind of the American upon purely practical objects.¹

Tocqueville's argument is founded not on the idea that the United States has become an exceptional nation over time but rather that the beliefs that have been around since the founding are what make the country exceptional. Only the unique combination of events coming together, in the right way and at the right time, created the United States. If these elements had not come together correctly, there is the potential that the United States would not have been any different from any other nation around the world. The words of Tocqueville have become the guiding principle behind the idea of American Exceptionalism. While the idea, this thesis will argue, was already part of American culture even before the United States was a country, Tocqueville is the first person to label it and by doing so set the foundation for further discussion on the topic.

But there is a problem that arises out of using the term American Exceptionalism to describe the unique culture of the United States. As Charles Murray points out in his work *American Exceptionalism: An Experiment in History*, there are several possible meanings that the term exceptional could have. "Some have interpreted 'exceptional' to mean 'wonderful,' and American Exceptionalism has been used as a framework for describing what is wonderful about America. It has been interpreted to mean that America has a special mission in the world and used in support of whatever measures that mission is taken to imply. Those who don't like the idea of American Exceptionalism

¹Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Champaign, Ill. [P.O. Box 2782, Champaign 61825]: Project Gutenberg, n.d., *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 25, 2014).

have attempted to refute it by pointing to the ways in which the history of the United States parallels that of other great imperial powers.”² This confusion can cause some to misunderstand what American Exceptionalism really means.

Taking up the idea set down by Tocqueville, Seymour Martin Lipset, in his book, *American Exceptionalism: A Double Edged Sword*, explores every aspect of American Exceptionalism. His purpose is to show that the United States is and always will be an exceptional nation. The basis for Lipset’s argument comes from the fact that the United States has never had a socialist party that has had any real say in United States politics. His argument is that American Exceptionalism, which results in a unique culture, is what has been able to keep the United States from going socialist. This is an important distinction because so many European countries after World War II turned to socialism at one point. Why was the United States able to resist the different ideology when so many other countries were not? The mindset of Americans is simply too different and too important to the country as a whole to ever let it go or allow it to be usurped by another ideology. Another important part of Lipset’s argument is that “Being an American is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American.” The citizens of the United States do not all share the same cultural background; rather the country is a mix of races and ethnicities from around the world. While another country would come together based on a common heritage, the United States is able to come together as a country based on a common set of shared beliefs. For a person to be un-American does not mean that they no longer live in the States, but rather that they do not agree with the belief system and the culture that binds all

²Charles Murray, *American Exceptionalism: An Experiment in History* (Washington D.C.: AIE Press, 2013), 4.

Americans together. This notion will become crucial across United States history as will be shown in later chapters.³

One thing that makes Lipset's argument so important when discussing American Exceptionalism is that he does not just focus on one aspect of American society. He tries to look at them all, everything from religion to the economy. One of the most important aspects of American Exceptionalism is religion and how it has worked differently in the United States especially when compared to other countries. This applies especially when the United States is compared to both Europe and Asia. "The strong ideological and achievement orientations in the American experience have been strengthened by its special religious character." There is something special about the United States religious experience that has not just touched the religious sphere but other spheres of American life as well. Capitalism, according to Max Weber, is a logical extension of Protestant values. There was something already present in the ideology of the Puritans that allowed them to accept and embrace a more capitalist ideology and practice. But it is not just economics that was affected by American religion. According to Lipset, "since most of the Protestant sects are congregational, not hierarchical, they have fostered egalitarian, individualistic, and populist values which are anti-elitist. Hence, the political ethos and the religious ethos have reinforced each other." Protestant beliefs line up with the beliefs that would later form the foundation of the United States. While there were Catholics, Mormons, and others in the colonies, the majority of citizens were of Protestant

³ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double Edged Sword* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), 31.

denominations. With their beliefs being more prominent in the colonies, their beliefs were going to have more of an impact on the future of the nation.⁴

The question that also must be asked is if American Exceptionalism is a term that can only be applied to certain time periods in United States history or can it be found throughout? Deborah Madsen answers this question in her work *American Exceptionalism*. “[Her] argument is that American Exceptionalism permeates every period of American History and it is the single most powerful agent in a series of arguments that have been fought down the centuries concerning the identity of America and Americans.” American Exceptionalism is the one concept that more than any other has helped shape what it means to be an American. American Exceptionalism is essential to the American cultural identity. For her this is a topic that cannot be ignored because it has become such a part of the cultural identity of United States citizens especially in this modern time. Madsen also argues that American Exceptionalism began as early as the first Puritans of Massachusetts Bay and has continued on from there.⁵

While there is compelling evidence that supports the idea of American Exceptionalism, there are those who do believe that the idea is simply a myth. Stephen Walt makes the argument against American Exceptionalism from an American foreign policy standpoint. “Yet there is nothing unusual about such lofty declarations; indeed, those who make them are treading a well-worn path. Most great powers have considered themselves superior to their rivals and have believed that they were advancing some greater good when they imposed their preferences on others.” Walt believes that the

⁴ Ibid., 58.

⁵ Deborah Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 1.

United States is using this idea of American Exceptionalism to further its ideas on the rest of the world. With this in mind, he believes that American Exceptionalism does not exist at all. Instead the United States is just taking the next logical step, a step that many other countries around the world have already taken. Another myth that Walt uses to argue against the idea of American Exceptionalism is the notion that “God Is on Our Side,” that God is helping the United States by showing the country what the best path to take is, and thus the U.S. is doing what God has ordained it do. “But when a nation starts to think it enjoys the mandate of heaven and becomes convinced that it cannot fail or be led astray by scoundrels or incompetents, then reality is likely to deliver a swift rebuke.” According to Walt, this notion that the United States can do no wrong has almost blinded America. Not only have other nations tried to claim that they are following the will of their God, that they are doing the works that their God has commanded, but also in many cases it has led them astray and actually hurt them in the long run. The United States has had its own troubles just like any other country. Walt would have Americans believe that the United States is not special, that it is following a prescribed pattern that many nations have already followed. But if this is true, why have so many unique and different achievements and accomplishments happened in the United States? ⁶

Walt is not the only person who disagrees with the idea of American Exceptionalism. Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznik believe that the myth of American Exceptionalism has been used by the United States as a way to justify such horrible actions as the war in Vietnam, the attack on Syria, and others. "The West won the world

⁶ Stephen M Walt, “The Myth of American Exceptionalism” *Foreign Policy* 189 (Nov. 2011): 72-75.
<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA271323331&v=2.1&u=txshracd2488&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&asid=282fbdd6f7af19afa8e7304508be205b>

not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion ... but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do.” Their argument is that students of the United States are able to believe in American Exceptionalism because they do not know their own history. Pointing to studies that indicate that high school seniors in the United States did worse on U.S. history tests when compared with all other subjects, Stone and Kuznik concluded that as a result, not just high school students, but anyone can latch on to false statements like Exceptionalism because they have not been properly informed about the truth. But what is wrong with Stone and Kuznik’s reasoning is that they do not take into account that some people really do believe in American Exceptionalism. People who conquered the West, as will be seen in following chapters, did really believe that what they were doing was right and just.⁷

American Exceptionalism is more than just the idea that the United States is different from other nations. Over the course of the country’s development, a sense of mission has formed. This involves a feeling that the United States has a unique role to play in the wider world. There is a feeling, that will be shown throughout this thesis, that the world must be saved, and only the United States with its unique combination of Christian values, geographic location, beliefs, and laws can make the world safe, civilized, and free.

This mission is embedded throughout United States history. As early as 1630, John Winthrop and the Puritan settlers of Massachusetts Bay articulated a mission to

⁷ Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznik, “Oliver Stone: The Myth of American Exceptionalism,” *USA Today*
<http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2013/10/25/obama-putin-american-exceptionalism-column/3181829/>

create a model for the world to follow--a perfect Christian commonwealth that would help save the rest of the world from itself. This sense of mission also can be identified in Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, in which the author argued that the British government should not and could not rule the colonies. The colonies had become too different from England; North America was too far away from England; and the English should never have had control in the first place. Chapter Two analyzes both the religious and secular dimensions of this sense of mission within the context of American Exceptionalism.

Once the Revolutionary War ended, and a new government was formed, the country began to think about other things, such as expanding territorially to make room for more citizens. This became the next evolution in the American sense of mission as it relates to American Exceptionalism. Manifest Destiny is a term coined during the middle of the nineteenth century to describe the special, God-given destiny that the United States possessed that allowed them to control and tame the entire continent. But Manifest Destiny eventually encompassed more than just the North American continent. The mission became to help other countries, like the Philippines and Cuba, adopt American institutions and values. Chapter Three explains this significant nineteenth-century concept.

Chapter Four demonstrates that with the outbreak of both World War I and World War II, the United States had to face the possibility of an attack against everything that it stood for, everything that made it an exceptional nation and gave it purpose. The United States as a result was forced to become involved in these wars to make the world safe for their way of life. While the sense of mission is still present, the mission itself changes.

No longer is the mission to spread American values around the world; now it is to keep the world safe for those ideas.

Finally, Chapter Five recognizes that American Exceptionalism remains a powerful notion in the twenty-first century and even became a major campaign topic during the 2012 presidential election. This is a clear indication that the United States maintains a commitment, or mission, to the rest of the world, whether or not everyone agrees the U.S. possesses an exceptional character. Joined altogether, these chapters will explore American Exceptionalism and argue that from the colonial period to the present, American Exceptionalism has been driven by a particular sense of mission that reinforces the distinctiveness of the American experiment.

CHAPTER TWO

The Foundations of American Exceptionalism

American Exceptionalism, as seen in Chapter One was an idea that was first described by Alexis de Tocqueville. He pointed out that it was the foundation of the United States and was the reason the U.S. was able to form such a unique society. This foundation began long before the United States was a country and even before the founders began thinking about a revolution. One person who helped shape the foundation of American Exceptionalism and the American sense of mission was John Winthrop. Winthrop was a Puritan layman and member of the English gentry who was instrumental in getting both approval and funding for the settlement at Massachusetts Bay. Elected governor twelve times, he clearly was an influential member of the society. Winthrop had his own idea about what this new colony should look like and how it should function in the wider world. In a lay sermon, titled “A Model of Christian Charity,” delivered on board the *Arbella* in 1630 on the way to the colonies, Winthrop laid out the foundation of what would become an instrumental part of American society.¹

The majority of the sermon centers on how Massachusetts Bay should function as a Christian model. According to Winthrop, there were four major elements necessary for this new society to function smoothly. First, the colonists would need to come together for the common good of the whole group. A foundation is not solid if the people who are

¹ Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 147-371.

supposed to hold it up are not united. Winthrop recognized this and thus centers the focus of his sermon around the idea that to make a good society each individual must put aside their own person goals and concentrate more on the ideas and needs of the group:

We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.²

This idea was crucial in creating a foundation for American Exceptionalism.

While Winthrop did not know it at the time, the country he was helping to found would have to rely heavily on this idea of a common goal and a common community where everyone works together, especially in light of the diversity that characterized subsequent migration to America. Somehow they were required at times to accommodate their own beliefs and customs and come together for something greater than themselves--the foundation of a nation. In doing so, they were following the example set down by Winthrop who believed that the only way to be successful was to come together as a whole, even though staying in the colonies was not Winthrop's long-term goal.³

Second, the colonists must figure out what was going to be the basis for why they were doing what they were doing. One of the most important aspects of American Exceptionalism is the belief that the United States is a country that has been given a special mission from God. The United States is a country in which God is the guiding force behind all actions and everything is done for his glory. (Today, the belief that this

² John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" *The World Religious & Spirituality Project* <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html>

³ Ibid.

mission comes directly from God is not as prominent, but it remains an important notion in American society.) Winthrop helped set this foundation as well. “The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, ‘may the Lord make it like that of New England.’” By centering the mission of this new land on a religious foundation, the focus of the society was a moral one. What was right versus what was wrong governed the lives of the citizens. But this has caused problems over time because what is right and what is wrong is open to interpretation. There are many instances of this moral imperative throughout United States history.⁴

Once the citizens knew from where they received justification for their actions, the next question to consider was how was this new society going to be viewed by the rest of the world. Winthrop’s answer to this question can be considered the main argument for American Exceptionalism. “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.” Winthrop realized that what he was creating was a new type of society that had never been tried before, a society that is based not on shared heritage or shared land, but rather on the shared beliefs. A society that must rise above the wrongs of the world and build an ideal society founded on morals rather than history. By creating such an idealized and functioning society, the people of this colony would be able to show the rest of the world that government does not have to

⁴ Ibid.

control the people but rather it can work with the people. As the title of the sermon says, this new society must be a “model of Christian charity” that the rest of the world could follow because it would not be tainted by the evils of the world. This would be a perfect Christian society that was able to rise above cultural and selfish individual needs, come together as a whole under the guidance of the Lord, and become a beacon for others to follow so that they too may come out from under the shadow of oppression.⁵

The final piece of the puzzle is what are the consequences if the society breaks away from its traditions and its beliefs. While in theory everything always works out according to the plan that is laid down, reality is something very different. There are unforeseen challenges that any society will have to face to be able to survive. What is needed is something that when the times get hard, the society as a whole can lean on. “But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other Gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it. Therefore let us choose life, that we and our seed may live, by obeying His voice and cleaving to Him, for He is our life and our prosperity.”⁶ By not keeping on the straight path, everything will fall apart; the society will not be able to live up to the expectations that Winthrop set for it. It would not be able to become more than a nation among nations. If the first generation was able to stay the course to moral citizenship and obey the fundamental principles established by Winthrop, the seed would have been planted. The next generation would grow up in knowledge of these teachings and be able

⁵Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

to see firsthand how things were working. This would lead them to follow the same example and then pass what they had learned to the next generation. This process would continue so that when the time came and there was an outside challenge to the system, the society would be able to rise up on the principles upon which it was founded, given to them by God, and throw off attempts at taking that away.⁷

The society that Winthrop helped to found soon began to grow as a larger part of the British Empire. As British colonies, the North American colonies were not treated the same as the average British citizen who lived in England. The colonists did not have a voice in the British Parliament, and after a series of harsh taxes designed to help repay the debt from the French and Indian War, some colonists began to see a need for change. Some of the colonists believed the British government was not treating them fairly and justly, and some were beginning to realize that they probably never would. There were several schools of thought during this time period: one school wanted to remain loyal to Great Britain no matter what; one school would remain loyal, if the colonies were given the representation they deserved; and finally, there was the group that believed the colonies should be independent from Great Britain. One of the supporters of independence was Thomas Paine. To help support the efforts of the Patriots, Paine published a pamphlet titled *Common Sense*. The pamphlet laid out a detailed explanation for why the colonies should be an independent nation.

Paine understood that the issue of independence for the North American colonies was more than just freedom for a few people. “The sun never shone on a cause of greater worth. ‘tis not the affairs of a city, a county, a province or a kingdom, but of a

⁷ Ibid.

continent... 'tis not the concern of a day, a year or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest and will be more or less affected even to the end of time.”⁸ The Revolutionary War was a fight for the current generation and every subsequent generation that followed. Just because the fight centered on a few colonies did not mean that it would not affect all colonists. This was a fight for rights that all colonists should have and as a result, much like the argument made by Winthrop, the people must stand together because they were fighting for something bigger than any one person. They were fighting the noblest battle there is--the fight for the inherent rights of all mankind.

But the question that Paine faces is “Why should the country break away from its mother country?” He answers this question by pointing out the differences that had grown between the colonies and the mother country that made it impossible for one to govern the other. In terms of economic power and economic strength, Paine responded, “America would have flourished as much and probably much more, had no European power had anything to do with her. The commerce, by which she hath enriched herself, are necessaries of life, and will always have a market while eating is the custom of Europe.”⁹ The North American colonies had resources that the European continent did not have, resources that the Continent would always need. Thus the Continent would have been willing to trade with the colonies even if they were not ruled by Great Britain. This leads to the question “Why has Great Britain been allowed to become the sole owner and sole governor of the entirety of all North American colonies along the east coast of

⁸ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, In *The Constitution of the United States of America and Selected Readings of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Barnes and Noble Inc., 2012), 141.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

the Continent?” The problem was that “Europe and not England, is the Parent country of America. This new world hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe.” How can one country have claimed control of a piece of land that is not inhabited by one racial group? What gives them the authority to rule over people of German, French or Dutch descent? What gives a monarch the right to rule over a country in the first place? “As the exalting one man so greatly above the rest, cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature, so neither can it be defended on the authority of scripture; for the will of the Almighty . . . expressly disapproves of the government by kings.”¹⁰ The idea of a king, Paine continued, went against everything that the people of this land held most dear. Not only did it go against the rights of individuals to decide for themselves who should be their ruler, but it also went against their belief in God and his teachings. This must never be allowed to happen, especially in a society that was so concerned with being just and right before the Lord.

This leads to another important question that Paine raises: Who has the right to rule in the first place? Paine argued that “Mankind being originally equals in the order of creation, the equality could only be destroyed by some subsequent circumstances; the distinction of rich and poor, may in a great measure be accounted for, and that with out having recourse to the harsh ill-sounding names of oppression and avarice.”¹¹ All humans were created by God to be the same, and they will remain the same unless something changes that. That is what happened in the colonies. The British government decided that the colonies were theirs to rule and that was the end of it. This was the real issue faced by

¹⁰ Ibid., 135.

¹¹ Ibid., 134.

the North American colonies: they were being oppressed by someone who had no natural right to rule over them, because no one person has the right to rule over another. That is one of the founding principles of the United States, that all people are equal and thus all should be allowed to have their own say in what goes on in government. Also the connection to the British government, which ruled unjustly over the colonies, forced the colonies into wars they had no business being in. “But the injuries and disadvantages we sustain by that connection are without number,” Paine writes, “and our duty to mankind at large as well as to ourselves, instructs us to renounce the alliance; because any submission to our dependence on Great Britain tends directly to involve this continent in European wars and quarrels; and sets us at variance with nations who would otherwise seek our friendship, and against whom we have neither anger nor complaint.”¹² The colonists did not all originate from England but came from all over Europe. Forcing all of the colonists to fight for the British cause forced some to turn on their homeland. This was an issue that was about more than economic necessity; it was about what was best for all those who lived in the colonies, no matter what their background was. These people should have been allowed to form their own connections to other countries based on what was best for them, not what was best for England. In the grand scheme of history, the colonies were a relatively recent endeavor. They had not been around that long, and for most of that time they were still learning how to survive; thus they had not built up any longstanding prejudices against one particular country over another. So why should they be forced to fight when in fact fighting might go against what is in their best interest?

¹² Ibid., 144.

Another factor that separated the colonies from Great Britain was geography. “As to government matters, it is not in the power of Britain to do this continent justice: the business of it will soon be too weighty and intricate to be managed with any tolerable degree of convenience by a power so distant from us and so very ignorant of us; for if they cannot conquer us, they cannot govern us. To be always running three or four thousand miles with a tale or a petition, waiting four or five months for an answer, which, when obtained, requires five or six more to explain it in, will in a few years be looked upon as folly and childishness—there was a time when it was proper, and there is a proper time for it to cease.”¹³ It is impractical for the colonies to be ruled by a country that was not only so far away but had to deal with its own problems as well, problems that would always come first. It was not right or fair for the colonies to be ignored while a country that was so far away and so far removed decided what was best for them. Not only were the British unjustly ruling these people but also they did not care enough to learn what was really going on and how their decisions were affecting the entire society spread over thirteen very different colonies each with growing populations and different needs to be addressed. For Paine, “Thousands are already ruined by British barbarity. Thousands more will probably suffer the same fate. Those men have other feelings than just us who have nothing suffered. All they now possess is liberty; what they before enjoyed is sacrificed to its service, and having nothing more to lose, they disdain submission.”¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., 147.

¹⁴ Ibid., 149.

Separation from Great Britain was the only solution that both acknowledged the differences between the two lands and ensured the rights of all citizens. Both are fundamental principles behind American Exceptionalism. Thomas Paine was able to show in his pamphlet that the North American colonies should have been more than just the puppets of the British government. These people were citizens who should have had the same rights and freedoms that were shared by all mankind. If the same type of situation had happened on the island, there probably would have been a different reaction from the government. It would have been in their faces, prominently on display, affecting their lives and their freedoms. Thus the action would have been swift and easy. But the colonies were different; an ocean separated them from Europe, most came from differing parts of Europe, and they produced goods that Europe needed.

Both Winthrop and Paine helped set the foundation upon which American Exceptionalist thinking was built. Winthrop hoped to create a model society, which had a unique role to play in the world; Paine saw that the colonies were fundamentally different from Great Britain and thus needed independence to keep going. Both believed that the colonies could and should be more than just another place. The colonies had the potential to be both a great model for the world and a great independent nation. It was these two men who helped set the foundation for the American sense of mission that would continue throughout United States history.

CHAPTER THREE

Expanding Not Just a Nation

During the early years of United States history, the focus was on establishing how the new country would operate. But once the initial tasks were completed, there were still questions that needed to be answered. One of the major questions of the nineteenth century was whether or not the United States would remain within the boundaries given to it as a result of independence, or would the country branch out farther and farther west. The answer to this question was yes; the country would not remain in the confines of its original territory. But it was not out of necessity that the United States began to migrate closer and closer to the Pacific coast; rather it was a result of the nation's belief in a unique and special destiny that allowed Americans to conquer new lands. Out of this belief came the justification for the idea of Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny:

implied that the United States was destined by the will of Heaven to become a country of political and territorial eminence. It attributed the probability and even the necessity of this growth to a homogeneous process created by certain unique qualities in American Civilization- the energy and vigor of its people, their idealism and faith in their democratic institutions, and their sense of mission now endowed with a new vitality. It assigned to the American people the obligation to extend the area of freedom to their less fortunate neighbors¹

This was a major issue for the people of the day. Their belief in Manifest Destiny gave to the people a sense of mission that it was their duty to expand out and help other populations. How do you create a city upon a hill or a nation that others will follow if you

¹ "Manifest Destiny: A National Force," in Norman A. Graebner, ed., *Manifest Destiny* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1968), xv.

do not spread and conquer the land that you are already living on? This issue represented both a moral right to help their fellow man, as well as an economic necessity to help their country. “[F]ew Americans ... would have denied that the nation’s economic superiority rested on elements unique to the North American environment- its raw materials and climate as well as a wide spectrum of productive and commercial advantages- which existed on only a small portion of the earth’s surface.” The United States had the space, it had the drive, and it had the necessity; that combination made Manifest Destiny not only possible but also unique to the U.S. because not many other countries possessed the right combination of specific characteristics that all came together in one country.²

Manifest Destiny can be seen throughout the literature of the time period, especially when it came to the issue of the annexation of Texas and the subsequent war with Mexico. Many argue that Manifest Destiny was the main reason for the U.S.- Mexican War. In fact, the term Manifest Destiny was first used during the debates on whether Texas should be allowed to join the Union. A reporter named John O’Sullivan said about the annexation that it was “our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”³ The belief was that what Americans were doing was not only the right and moral thing to do, but the Godly thing to do as well. They were given this special destiny from God. Much like kings and queens of old received their power from God, so too did the United States.

President James K. Polk was a staunch supporter of Manifest Destiny, especially

² Ibid., xv- lxix.

³ John O’Sullivan, "Annexation," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17, no.1 (July-August 1845): 5-10. <http://web.grinnell.edu/courses/HIS/f01/HIS202-01/Documents/OSullivan.html>

when it came to the annexation of Texas. He did not use the actual term during his war message to Congress but the elements of manifest destiny are present.

Instead of this, however, we have been exerting our best efforts to propitiate her good will. Upon the pretext that Texas, a nation as independent as herself, thought proper to unite its destinies with our own she has affected to believe that we have severed her rightful territory, and in official proclamations and manifestoes has repeatedly threatened to make war upon us for the purpose of reconquering Texas. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war.⁴

Texas was willing and ready to become part of the United States, a request that the United States could not deny because it would be denying the rights of the citizens of Texas to the special American destiny. Texans wanted to be part of the United States system. The United States was doing what was right by allowing Texas to enter the Union because the U.S. was helping Texans gain the rights shared by all mankind. It was Mexico that was stepping on the rights of its people and that could not be allowed. It was the destiny of the nation to protect people against those who do not know the truth about what it means to be free.

But the annexation of Texas was not the only instance of Manifest Destiny during the nineteenth century. Another example that resulted from the belief that it was the destiny of the United States to control the North American continent was the issue of who had a rightful claim to the Oregon Territory. The problem arose out of the fact that the boundaries of the territory were in dispute between the United States and England. This potentially could have led to another confrontation with Great Britain, but the dispute was

⁴ James K. Polk, "Special Message to Congress on Mexican Relations," May 11, 1846 Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=67907>

resolved quickly with the Oregon Treaty of 1846. Before the treaty was signed, however, there was major debate on the floor of Congress discussing why the United States had a duty to annex the Oregon Territory. There were two major speeches that centered on the ideal that it was the natural law of the United States to own the territory. Representative Frederick P. Stanton of Tennessee, in a speech titled “Justification of American Claims by Higher Law,” argued that England had no right to the land because “the law which makes the ocean a barrier to instantaneous communication between nations—the law of nature, which has separated continents by interposing vast abysses, forbids that nations on one continent shall have rights on another by implication, extension, contiguity or by any other invisible, intangible, metaphysical principle whatever.”⁵ The Oregon Territory was part of the continent of North America; it was not part of the continent of Europe. It was separated from Britain not only by an ocean but also an entire country. By this logic, the Oregon Territory was destined to be part of the United States because it was already more closely connected to the U.S. than to Great Britain. Stanton went on to argue that “The United States owe it to themselves—they owe it to this continent, and the world—to resist”; also “our relations to this continent are widely different. We have arisen here, a mighty nation, fast approaching and destined soon to surpass, the greatness of any European power.”⁶ This issue revolved around more than just who was closer to the land. Because England still controlled Canada, this was a matter of national pride. If the United States were simply to give up the land to the British, then that would show the rest of the world that the United States was a weak country. By backing down from its God given

⁵Frederick P. Stanton, “Justification of American Claims by Higher Law,” in Graebner, ed., *Manifest Destiny*, 93.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

destiny it would show the rest of the world that maybe the United States was not as unique as it believed itself to be. How was the United States supposed to be a city upon a hill when it was not willing to fight not only for a piece of land but also for the beliefs that made them who they were. Finally, Stanton made arguably his best argument by saying, “ I believe it is our destiny to possess the whole of Oregon; but this destiny does not make it right; it is our destiny, because it is right.” Again, the moral foundation of the United States can be seen in full force. What the government is doing is morally right; they are fighting for a piece of land that should naturally belong to the United States of America, and it would be morally wrong if the U.S. did not control the land.⁷

Congressman Lewis C. Levin of Pennsylvania continued on where Stanton left off by adding more weight to the argument that it was God’s natural law that the United States should possess the Oregon Territory:

Am I asked on what I found this principle of inherent and pre-existing right? I answer on the genius of American institutions—on the spirit of republicanism, that permits not the contaminating proximity of monarchies upon the soil that we have consecrated to the rights of man, and the sublime machinery of the sovereign power of the people; on the eternal law of God, which have given the earth to man for a habitation, and told him that the natural boundaries to a country only terminate where oceans intervene, and contiguity is obstructed by some formidable obstacle which separates nations and marks out their native home as distinctly drawn by the lines of military art.⁸

In this one statement, the congressman was able to state everything that makes the United States different from Great Britain while at the same time using those differences to justify the United States claim to the Oregon Territory. Levin implied that having a British colony so close to the United States, a British colony that was governed not by its

⁷ Ibid., 94.

⁸ Lewis C. Levin, “Justification by Contiguity,” Graebner, ed., *Manifest Destiny*, 96.

people, but by a king, would be a step back. The country had worked hard to ensure the rights of its citizens, and having a monarchy so close threatened what the founding fathers worked so hard to prevent. Levin also argued that the British should not have control of the territory because “the people of Oregon are free, sovereign and independent. They ask to be governed by American laws, which they have a right to obey and which we have a right to grant, and which, on no principle, have we a right to refuse.” When the citizens ask specifically to be controlled by the laws of the United States, it would go against everything that the country stood for to turn them away without a fight. It is the mission of the country to help them.⁹

One of the most recognizable examples of Manifest Destiny in American culture is John Gast’s 1872 painting entitled “American Progress.” The picture not only shows westward expansion but also is able to convey Americans’ feelings about what they were doing by moving west. The image is a lithograph and published in *Croft’s Trans-Continental Tourist Guide (1874)*.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid., 100-101.

¹⁰ “American Progress,” *Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalogue* (Accessed April 25, 2014) <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97507547/>



While the painting is beautiful, it is also the description of the painting that adds to the feeling of Manifest Destiny.

In the foreground, the central and principal figure, a beautiful and charming female, is floating westward through the air, bearing on her forehead the "Star of Empire." She has left the cities of the east far behind, crossed the Alleghenies and the "Father of Waters," and still her march is westward. In her right hand she carries a book--common schools--the emblem of education and the testimonial of our national enlightenment, while with the left hand she unfolds and stretches the slender wires of the telegraph, that are to flash intelligence throughout the land. On the right of the picture, is a city, steamships, manufactories, schools and churches, over which beams of light are streaming and filling the air--indicative of civilization. The general tone of the picture on the left, declares darkness, waste and confusion. From the city proceed the three great continental lines of railway, passing the frontier settlers' rude cabin and tending toward the Western Ocean. Next to these are the transportation wagons, overland stage, hunters, gold-seekers, pony express, the pioneer emigrant and the war dance of the "noble red man." Fleeing from "Progress," and towards the blue waters of the Pacific, which shows itself on the left of the picture beyond the snow-capped summits of the Sierra Nevadas, are the Indians, buffaloes, wild horses, bears, and other game, moving westward--ever westward--the Indians with their squaws, papooses, and "pony-lodges," turn their despairing faces towards, as they flee from, the presence of the wondrous vision. The "Star" is too much for them. What American man, woman or child, does not feel a heart-throb of exultation as they think of the glorious

achievements of PROGRESS since the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers, on stanch old Plymouth Rock!¹¹

The painting and the description provide a clear picture of what Americans thought about the idea of Manifest Destiny. It was their destiny to control the West, to bring civilization to the uncivilized, and most importantly, it was their destiny and theirs alone. This is the very essence of American Exceptionalism, the belief that there is something different about America that needs to be shared with the rest of the world. Only the United States could bring the light to the darkness. Only Americans could bring civilization to the uncivilized. What is the most striking and most telling about the painting is the woman in the picture. She is floating across the landscape, almost like an angel, representing God's constant favor. While the description does not specifically say she is, the feeling is still there. She is not only bringing education through the books in her hand but she is bringing moralism-- she is bringing Christianity to the untamed lands. It all goes back to the unique American mission. Americans were not going west just to conquer and invade the land; they were going to bring with them their way of life. They were going to teach those who were already living on the land what it meant to be an American because, as seen in the first chapter, to be an American does not mean you have to come from the same background; one just has to believe in the American ideals.

Another example of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century was the Spanish-American War. Fought for only ten months in 1898, this war was supposed to help the Cuban people gain independence from Spain. But, with the feeling of expansionism still prevalent in the United States, the war turned into another example of the idea that it was

¹¹ "Croftt's Trans-Continental Tourist Guide (1874)" *University of Virginia Library* (accessed April 25, 2014)
<http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/roughingit/map/westmaphpap.html>

the United States' destiny to inhabit these lands. Much like the feelings surrounding John Gast's painting, this war was about the fact that only the United States could bring civilization to the uncivilized.

One example of the continued focus on expansion was a speech given by Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana. His speech, entitled "The March of the Flag," begins with a very bold statement: "It is a noble land that God has given us; a land that can feed and clothe the world; a land whose coastlines would enclose half the countries of Europe; a land set like a sentinel between the two imperial oceans of the globe, a greater England with a nobler destiny." In this statement, Beveridge was able to invoke everything that separated the United States from the rest of the world. The U.S. was a God-given land uniquely placed in the world to stop the imperial powers from expanding their influence. Again, like so many times before, Beveridge invoked a moral argument: it was God who allowed for this to happen to the United States; therefore, it must be noble and right. But it is not just the land that God has ordained with this special destiny it is the people as well. "It is a mighty people that He has planted on this soil; a people sprung from the most masterful blood of history; a people perpetually revitalized by the virile, man-producing working-folk of all the earth; a people imperial by virtue of their power, by right of their institutions, by authority of their Heaven-directed purposes-the propagandists and not the misers of liberty." The people have a right and a duty given to them by God to share liberty with the rest of the world. It is the combination of all of these factors that made up the United States and that allowed for the expansion of the

country. By allowing this expansion to occur, not only was the United States expanding territorially but its beliefs were expanding as well.¹²

Another supporter of the war with Spain was Theodore Roosevelt. His approach was different from Beveridge's but the same basic principle remained. "If we seek merely swollen, slothful ease and ignoble peace, if we shrink from the hard contests where men must win at the hazard of their lives and at the risk of all they hold dear, then bolder and stronger peoples will pass us by, and will win for themselves the domination of the world."¹³ The United States has worked too hard and fought too long for the course of freedom to be bullied into submission by other countries because it refused to act. If the United States had such a unique destiny in the world it must go out and fight for it and ensure that it was never possible for that destiny to be threatened because, then, it would mean that everything the U.S. believed was false. If the United States were to allow another country to become stronger and possibly threaten the security of the U.S., especially its beliefs, then that would imply that the Lord was not on their side, that God did not give them a special place in the world, and, thus, the United States would have no purpose and no justification for anything that it did.

Manifest Destiny was a perfect example of American Exceptionalism in United States history. Just like American Exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny was a fundamental belief held by citizens of the United States that their country was not only different from the rest of the world, but had a God-given mission to bring U.S. rights to the world. This

¹² Albert Beveridge, "The March of Flags," Modern History Source Book: Albert Beveridge's The March of The Flag, *Fordham University* <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1898beveridge.asp>

¹³ "Imperialism and the Spanish-American War," *Digital History* (Accessed April 25, 2014) <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/us27.cfm>

is shown in the rhetoric of the time period; the people believed that what they were doing was not only right but it was necessary. To not strive to reach beyond the United States original borders would shun everything held dear and everything upon which the United States was founded. It was the mission of the United States to help these people.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Shift in the Mission

Each time period in United States history has posed a unique set of challenges that had to be overcome. The first challenge was to break away from colonial rule and set up a functioning government that would last. Once that was established, came the challenge of expansion and discovering the United States' place in the wider world. But once a place is established it is hard to maintain that place when there are outside forces working against it. The United States in the nineteenth century was focused on expanding its borders to help others gain what the United States had. In the twentieth century, with the onslaught of outside forces, mainly World Wars I and II, the United States was forced to change its thinking. No longer was the American way of life safe inside the borders of the United States. No longer were the ideals that citizens of the United States believed in safe from attack. What the World Wars did was force the United States to defend the unique beliefs and way of life that are essential to which the United States aspires to be as a country. Where in the nineteenth century the United States had taken an offensive role, in the twentieth century the United States had to take a proactive yet defensive role.

Soon after the outbreak of World War I, on August 19, 1914, President Woodrow Wilson gave his famous "Message on Neutrality" speech. The central message of the speech was that the United States should remain neutral during the conflict in Europe. This was a point in United States history when the American sense of mission began to change. No longer could the United States focus simply on the Western Hemisphere and

helping to bringing light to the darkness, now the focus shifted from bringing civilization to making the world safe for American ideas. Wilson illustrated this point by saying, in regards to coming together as a country, “Such divisions among us would be fatal to our peace of mind and might seriously stand in the way of the proper performance of our duty as the one great nation at peace, the people holding itself ready to play a part of impartial mediation and speak councils of peace and accommodation, not as a partisan, but as a friend.” This is the United States’ role, as Wilson saw it, in the beginning of the war. The United States had a unique role to play in the wider world, a role that the country could not play if it was being divided from the inside. What separated the United States from the rest of the world was that the country was willing to be on the outside and rise above the conflicts that were facing Europe so that, when the time came, the United States could be a model for the world to follow in order to prevent war in the future. It all went back to John Winthrop’s vision of what the colonies should be to the rest of the world-- the city upon a hill model, which was one of the founding ideas of American Exceptionalism. Wilson reiterated this notion of the United States special place in the world by saying, “I feel sure, the earnest wish and purpose of every thoughtful American that this great country of ours... should show herself in this time of peculiar trial a Nation fit beyond others to establish the fine poise of undisturbed judgment, the dignity of self-control, the efficiency of dispassionate action.” He was appealing to the very core of what the American sense of mission is.¹

¹ Woodrow Wilson, “Message on Neutrality,” August 19, 1914, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=65382>

While Wilson and the country may have wanted to remain neutral, the German government had other plans. Neutrality did work for the first few years of the war. In fact, President Wilson was elected to his second term in office based on the slogan, “He kept us out of war.”² But, during the early years of the war, the United States was still continuing its economic relationship with the continent of Europe. As a result, many American ships were still crossing the Atlantic. As part of its war strategy, the Germans engaged in unrestricted submarine warfare. This meant that no matter if the ship was from a belligerent country or not, the Germans would attempt to sink any ship that tried to dock in any port controlled by German enemies. As a result, at least three ships containing U.S. citizens were either sunk or severely damaged, but that was not enough for the country to break neutrality. It was the Zimmerman telegram that forced the U.S. to finally respond.

The Zimmerman telegram was a message intercepted by the British that was sent by the German government to the German ambassador to Mexico.³ The message stated that the Germans “intend to begin on the first of February unrestricted submarine warfare. We shall endeavor in spite of this to keep the United States of America neutral. In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal of alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New

² Frank Freidel and Hugh Sidey “The Presidents of the United States of America,” *The White House Historical Association* 2006
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/woodrowwilson>

³“Zimmerman Telegram Decoded,” *National Archives*,
<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/zimmermann/>

Mexico, and Arizona.”⁴ What makes this statement so powerful is that the territory that had been taken from Mexico, by the U.S., as seen in Chapter Three, was gained under the guise of Manifest Destiny, a belief that had become central to who the United States was as a country. Now, in one telegram the Germans had threatened not only American citizens but also, territory that the United States had gained based on its own unique beliefs.

Soon the United States would have to go to war, but the problem was, with so much talk up to that point being on the idea of the United States remaining neutral so that it could be an impartial mediator, how did the country suddenly justify changing course so drastically. Again the nation turned to President Wilson for guidance on the correct course of action to take. Wilson believed, “Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples, and the menace to that peace and freedom lies in the existence of autocratic governments backed by organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not by the will of their people.”⁵ The United States could not stand by and allow other humans to be slaughtered mercilessly by any government, especially a government that did not have the backing of its people. This is where the United States’ place in the wider world began to change as the times changed. Again the focus was on saving all mankind not just on spreading U.S. ideas:

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Woodrow Wilson, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress Requesting a Declaration of War Against Germany,” April 2, 1917. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, the American Presidency Project <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=65366>

The challenge is to all mankind. Each nation must decide for itself how it will meet it. The choice we make for ourselves must be made with a moderation of counsel and a temperateness of judgment befitting our character and our motives as a nation. We must put excited feeling away. Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion.⁶

The importance of these few sentences was vital to the position taken by the United States upon entering World War I. It also encouraged the people of the United States to remain calm and dignified. This is the genius of this speech. What President Wilson was able to do was show that the United States was entering the war not to avenge the deaths of its fallen citizens but rather for humanitarian reasons. The Germans had gone against not just the rights of American citizens but the rights of citizens around the world. Something that the United States, a country whose central belief was the freedom of all, needed to address. It would make the United States seem almost hypocritical to talk about freedom and democracy but then not back it up with action. Thus it became the mission of the United States to protect the world from those who intended to harm it. “There is one choice we can not make, we are incapable of making: we will not choose the path of submission and suffer the most sacred rights of our nation and our people to be ignored or violated. The wrongs against which we now array ourselves are no common wrongs; they cut to the very roots of human life.”⁷

The larger question is why must the United States engage in armed conflict with the German government. “We are accepting this challenge of hostile purpose because we know that in such a government, following such methods, we can never have a friend;

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

and that in the presence of its organized power, always lying in wait to accomplish we know not what purpose, there can be no assured security for the democratic governments of the world.” For the United States, World War I was not about territorial acquisition or problems with its neighbors as it had been in the nineteenth century. This was a question of something much deeper, the protection of democracy; something that the country fought to obtain, and now had to fight to keep safe. While the borders of the country were not threatened directly, the principles were, which is what held the country together. Which is why “The world must be made safe for democracy.”⁸

This was the belief that the United States would have moving forward. The belief that its new place in the world was to ensure the rights of democratic nations, which is still in keeping with the foundation of American Exceptionalism because, as Wilson stated in his neutrality message, only the United States could be the country to mediate between the warring countries. The same principle was still in place, only the focus had changed. The United States was the only country that can make the world “safe for democracy.” The United States must be the country that leads from the front; it must be the model for the rest of the world to follow. This position was made clear by Wilson’s Fourteen Point solution: “What we demand in this war, therefore, is nothing peculiar to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression.” This reiterates the fact that the United States did not become involved in World War I for conventional reasons. The

⁸ Ibid

United States entered the war to protect the values that it held most dear and to help other countries that held similar values keep their values intact as well. Just because the war was over did not mean, in Wilson's eyes that the United States should retreat within its own borders. Too much had happened and too many things had changed to make that possible. American Exceptionalism at its core had not changed, but rather the mission of the United States had. The United States now had to take a more proactive approach when it came to defending the country. It was for this reason that Wilson suggested as part of his Fourteen Points that a League of Nations be established because, "In regard to these essential rectifications of wrong and assertions of right we feel ourselves to be intimate partners of all the governments and peoples associated together against the Imperialists. We cannot be separated in interest or divided in purpose."⁹

The threat faced by mankind was not just something that the United States could ignore anymore. Its mission now was to take a proactive approach to prevent American ideas from being harmed. Freedom could not be limited to just one country; rather freedom must be fought for, shared, and protected at all costs to truly have a just world that was safe for democracy to live and thrive. This is crucial when World War II breaks out. With the foundation set in World War I that the United States is fighting not for itself but for the rights of mankind, the United States was able to enter World War II the same way. This overall change in thinking can really be seen in Franklin Roosevelt's fireside chats. During his first wartime radio address to the people, given two days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt said: "We are now in the midst of a war, not for conquest, not for vengeance, but for a world in which this Nation, and all that this Nation

⁹ Woodrow Wilson, "14 Points" 8 January 1918 Published by *The Avalon Project*, Yale University http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp

represents, will be safe for our children. We expect to eliminate the danger from Japan, but it would serve us ill if we accomplished that and found that the rest of the world was dominated by Hitler and Mussolini.” This is what it meant to be an American during this time period. This was an issue that was bigger than any one individual citizen; this was about the destiny of a nation as a whole. Much like World War I, it was the special destiny of the United States to keep the world safe against those who threatened basic human rights. “The United States does not consider it a sacrifice to do all one can, to give one's best to our Nation, when the Nation is fighting for its existence and its future life.” There would be no future life if others subverted the United States’ core values. All of mankind should be able to share in the riches of democracy, and it was the United States’ job to ensure it happened.¹⁰

President Roosevelt, like President Wilson, understood that this would be a challenge for the American public to accept. For so long the country had tried to remain out of European affairs and concern itself with issues at home. To help ease the tensions that this war brought, Roosevelt invoked one of the most famous men in American history. “Washington's conduct in those hard times has provided the model for all Americans ever since- a model of moral stamina. He held to his course, as it had been charted in the Declaration of Independence. He and the brave men who served with him knew that no man's life or fortune was secure, without freedom and free institutions.” President Roosevelt was able to show that without the freedom of all peoples around the world then the United States would never be completely free. It was what the founders

¹⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Fireside Chat," December 9, 1941. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16056>

fought for; it was what both sides in the Civil War fought for; and it was what the United States fought for in World War I and would continue to fight for after the war was over. There is no separating the freedom of the United States from the freedom of the rest of the world any more. “The present great struggle has taught us increasingly that freedom of person and security of property anywhere in the world depend upon the security of the rights and obligations of liberty and justice everywhere in the world.”¹¹

Once World War II was over, the world was still not safe. Communism threatened the very ideas of democracy and freedom, and it was spreading. The space race between the United States and the Soviet Union was a product of fear and concern about the growing threat of the Soviet Union. This was not just about who could launch more satellites into the sky faster; this also had national security implications for the United States. If the Soviet Union had the technology to launch satellites into space, they also had the technology to launch major weapons against the United States. “In general, John F. Kennedy felt great pressure to have the United States ‘catch up to and overtake’ the Soviet Union in the ‘space race.’ Four years after the Sputnik shock of 1957, the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had become the first human in space on April 12, 1961, embarrassing the U.S. While Alan Shepard became the first American in space on May 5, he only flew on a short suborbital flight instead of orbiting the Earth, as Gagarin had done.”¹²

¹¹Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Fireside Chat," February 23, 1942. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16224>

¹² “The Decision to Go to the Moon: President John F. Kennedy's May 25, 1961 Speech before a Joint Session of Congress,” *National Aeronautics and Space Administration NASA History Office* <http://history.nasa.gov/moondec.html>

With all of this in mind the United States had to act quickly. It was not in the nature of the United States to back down and let someone else take the lead, especially when national security was at stake. In response to the Soviets' accomplishment, President Kennedy made a radical statement: "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth."¹³ Now the United States was determined to place a man on the moon first, again taking the proactive approach to prevent the threat. It was a matter of national pride as well as a matter of national dignity to make it happen. In a speech delivered at Rice University in September of 1961, President Kennedy went on to explain the importance of this effort. "Yet the vows of this Nation can only be fulfilled if we in this Nation are first, and, therefore, we intend to be first. In short, our leadership in science and in industry, our hopes for peace and security, our obligations to ourselves as well as others, all require us to make this effort, to solve these mysteries, to solve them for the good of all men, and to become the world's leading space-faring nation." How could the United States be a model for the rest of the world to follow if they were falling behind the world in the crucial area of technology? President Kennedy went on to say, "Within these last 19 months at least 45 satellites have circled the earth. Some 40 of them were 'made in the United States of America' and they were far more sophisticated and supplied far more knowledge to the people of the world than those of the Soviet Union." The nation's pride and dignity was at stake. This was something that the whole nation

¹³ John F. Kennedy, "Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs," May 25, 1961, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8151>

could rally behind, as a way to help beat back the Soviet threat. This was who the United States was: “We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.”¹⁴

The twentieth century was a time of change in the United States. Change occurred in all corners of life, but the most important change occurred in how the United States saw its role in the wider world. No longer was the mission to expand civilization and the American way of life; it became a mission to make the world safe for the American belief system by taking a proactive approach. The United States had a unique mission to help the world. The goal was not to help the world become more like the United States; the goal was to keep what the United States stood for safe, and to do that, the world had to be safe from threats not just of violence but of differing ideologies. Once again, this became the justification for why the United States acted the way it did.

¹⁴ John F. Kennedy, “John F. Kennedy Moon Speech - Rice Stadium,” September 12, 1962. Published by *NASA* <http://er.jsc.nasa.gov/seh/ricetalk.htm>

CHAPTER FIVE

Looking Forward

Across the history of the United States there has been a feeling among important members of society that this country was something special, something different from the rest of the world. But it is more than just that the United States is something different. With this difference comes a unique mission that many argue can only be carried out by citizens of the United States because they have been given a unique destiny from God. This idea is not a new concept in United States society; it extends throughout American history, as has been shown in the previous chapters. Beginning before the United States was even a country the foundation for what would become American Exceptionalism was laid down. With the sermon “A Model of Christian Charity,” John Winthrop laid out an idealized society founded on the principles of a godly life. But this was more than just a society that was to be founded upon the Christian belief system; rather, this was to be a model society that the rest of the world could follow. This simple idea sets the foundation for the belief that God had ordained this new land and had given it His blessings.

Winthrop was not the only person who helped set the foundation for the United States being a society that is different from other countries. Thomas Paine also helped further this idea in his Revolutionary War-era pamphlet titled *Common Sense*. Unlike Winthrop, Paine focused on the physical aspects that differentiated the United States from the rest of the world. He argued that the colonies should rule themselves because England no longer could. There was an ocean between England and the colonies; not all

citizens were of English decent; the colonies were simple getting too big; and being under English rule meant that they could only trade with England. But he also argued that England did not have the right to rule anyone because they were founded around an unjust system.

With the foundation laid by people like Winthrop and Paine, the United States was able to come together as a country, not based on background or experience but based on shared beliefs. After coming together as a nation, the focus shifted from foundation to expansion in the form of Manifest Destiny, a belief that came out of what it means to be a citizen of the United States. Manifest Destiny took it one step farther and said that the United States had a unique destiny in the world, given to Americans by God, to expand the country beyond its original borders. This is the point where American Exceptionalism can be seen in the writing and speeches of the time period. With such examples as the annexation of Texas, the claiming of the Oregon Territory and the Spanish-American War, American Exceptionalism was used as a way to justify what the United States was doing. The nation was expanding because it was its God-given destiny/ mission to bring civilization to the uncivilized and only they could do it.

Much as the events surrounding Manifest Destiny had taken the ideas laid down by Winthrop and Paine a step further, so too did the events of the twentieth century. World War I, World War II, and the Cold War saw the unique belief system of the United States under attack from the outside world. The country responded to this by shifting its focus. No longer could the United States stand by and allow atrocities to happen; now it had to act to save these people because the U.S. was the only country that could. It was the only country that had the correct belief system, the God-given blessing, and it had not

become involved in the European conflict. The focus was simply on helping mankind gain the freedoms that the United States already enjoyed and believed all were entitled to.

American Exceptionalism is a term that can be seen over the course of United States history, but the question is, “Will this trend continue?” This question can be answered by looking at how American Exceptionalism has been expressed in the twenty-first century. The twenty-first century is only a few years old, and already American Exceptionalism has become a major topic in American politics, especially the 2012 presidential election. The article “American Exceptionalism: An Old Idea and a New Political Battle,” argues that, “‘American Exceptionalism’ is a phrase that, until recently, was rarely heard outside the confines of think tanks, opinion journals and university history departments.”¹ This is furthered by a UC Santa Barbara study that found not a single American president from 1981 on used the term American Exceptionalism until President Barack Obama.² But once President Obama used the term, almost like a wildfire, American Exceptionalism began to be used more and more in political discussion. It arose several times in the lead-up to the election of 2012 and received so much attention that by the time the election came around it was everywhere. The idea became a battleground for the candidates, especially Republican candidate Mitt Romney.

¹ Karen Tumulty, “American Exceptionalism: An Old Idea and a New Political Battle,” *Washington Post Politics* 29, November 2010.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/28/AR2010112804139.html>

² John A. Gans Jr, “American Exceptionalism and the Politics of Foreign Policy,” *The Atlantic* 21, November 2011,
<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/11/american-exceptionalism-and-the-politics-of-foreign-policy/248779/>

But the issue did not become an issue because of something the Republicans said, but rather because of something the Democrats said. President Obama stated: “I believe in American Exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British Exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek Exceptionalism.” This fuelled the fire for the Republican Party to say that the president was un-American; and that he went against the very nature of what it means to be a citizen of the United States. Romney responded to the comments by vehemently disagreeing with what President Obama had said. Romney believed that “Americans are a chosen people who continue to live out the view of the Puritan John Winthrop that we should be as a city upon a hill, an experiment in democracy and liberty that inspires the world.”³ Romney was not the only Republican who believed in American Exceptionalism; the entire party did. According to the Republican campaign website: “We are the party of peace through strength. Professing American Exceptionalism – the conviction that our country holds a unique place and role in human history – we proudly associate ourselves with those Americans of all political stripes who, more than three decades ago in a world as dangerous as today’s, came together to advance the cause of freedom.”⁴

Another political figure who has been an outspoken supporter of this idea for years is former Speaker of the House and former presidential candidate Newt Gingrich. For Gingrich this is a major topic that needs to be discussed in American culture today.

³ David Gergen and Michael Zuckerman, “2012 winner must unite America on ideals,” CNN, 4 July 2012 <http://www.cnn.com/2012/07/03/opinion/gergen-zuckerman-exceptionalism/>

⁴ “Republican Platform: We Believe in America,” *GOP.com* http://www.gop.com/2012-republican-platform_exceptionalism/

“‘America is simply the most extraordinary nation in history.’ ‘This is not a statement of nationalist hubris,’ he insists, but rather “an historical fact.’”⁵ But for Gingrich, American Exceptionalism is more than a term that can be used to describe the United States. He believes that “in an era where campaigns and candidates seem to have forgotten what a thesis statement that serves to tie together a campaign’s message is, the former history professor also uses American Exceptionalism to articulate not only what he is fighting against but what he is for.”⁶ Gingrich believes that American Exceptionalism is under attack and that the country needs to remember more and more where it came from; if not, then everything that the United States had fought for could vanish.

The speeches of these three men show that the concept of American Exceptionalism is still alive in the United States today and is actually becoming more and more important. But, it is not just the candidates and members of government that are talking about the idea of American Exceptionalism. According to a *USA Today* poll conducted during the election, “Eighty percent of Americans... say they believe the country has a unique character and unrivaled standing- a higher degree of national unanimity than on any current policy issue.”⁷ There are still people who believe that there is something different about the United States, that this country was founded upon a

⁵ Jerome Karabel, “‘American Exceptionalism’ and the Battle for the Presidency,” *Huffington Post*, 22 December 2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jerome-karabel/american-exceptionalism-obama-gingrich_b_1161800.html

⁶ Tony Lee, “Newt Gingrich Best Articulates American Exceptionalism,” *Human Events: Powerful Conservative Voices*, 12 September 2011 <http://www.humanevents.com/2011/09/12/newt-gingrich-best-articulates-american-exceptionalism/>

⁷ Susan Page, “America’s place in the world could play part in 2012 elections,” *USA Today*. 21 December 2010. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/2010-12-21-1Aexceptional21_CV_N.htm

unique set of beliefs and principles that have been its guiding light ever since. This is why American Exceptionalism will never go away; it is part of what it means to be a citizen of the United States. As a result, there will always be people who believe in the core values of the United States; there will always be people who will fight for the rights they hold dear; there will always be people who understand that the United States has a unique place in the wider world. Times may change and the concept may be expanded and modified, but at its core American Exceptionalism is a concept that has been and always will be part of the United States of America, and it will always give the country a sense of mission.

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