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Trump and American Exceptionalism

By Stephen Wertheim

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Since Donald Trump's election as U.S. president on November 8, the liberal commentariat has been sounding the alarm on the fate of the international order: the Pax Americana is over. Four years after dismissing American decline as a [myth](#), Robert Kagan now claims we're [nearing](#) the "end of the 70-year-old U.S. world order." Ian Buruma, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, [laments](#) that those who voted for Trump and Brexit wish to "pull down the pillars" of liberal internationalism and retreat into isolation.

Such eulogies say less about Trump or his voters than about the limits of conventional wisdom. The president-elect denounced nation-building and demanded that U.S. allies pay more for protection, but so have many of his predecessors. And Trump never promised to [retract the United States' global power](#). To the contrary, he vowed to build up the military, go after Islamist terrorism, and counter Chinese aggression. An isolationist he is not.

But Trump has distinguished himself in one dramatic respect: He may be the first president to take office who explicitly [rejects American exceptionalism](#).

CITY ON A HILL

"We shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us," said John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony, in 1630. The proclamation encapsulates American exceptionalism, or the belief (whether religious or secular) that the United States stands in the vanguard of history, chosen by providence to redeem mankind. Trump has already distinguished himself in one dramatic respect. He may be the first president to take office who explicitly rejects American exceptionalism.

Exceptionalism does not prescribe a single course of action. Indeed, it has proven durable because it can vindicate opposing foreign policies: it justified the United States' political and military separation from the corrupt Old World before World War II, and has lent legitimacy to U.S. interventions thereafter. But whatever the specific policy, the doctrine of exceptionalism has traditionally led Americans to believe that their country is [leading the world](#), whether through the power of its example or the example of its power. This is true even of President Barack Obama, who, right-wing criticism notwithstanding, has proclaimed the United States to be "exceptional" [more frequently](#) than any other U.S. president.