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Trump and American Exceptionalism

By Stephen Wertheim

9-11 minutes

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.

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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.

Enter Trump. On announcing his candidacy, he made the stakes clear: “We need somebody that can take the brand of the United States and make it great again.” As his rival, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, churned out position papers, Trump depicted the United States in speech after speech as a retrograde nation. “We’re like a Third World country,” he declared. It was once great, but the country would now have to claw its way back, first to first world standards and then, perhaps, to preeminence. In place of confident exceptionalism, [Trump offered insecure nationalism](#), recasting the United States as a global victim.

As evidence of national decline, Trump pointed to the country’s airports, citing them not only as examples of crumbling national infrastructure, but also as places that elicit international disdain. When travelers leave Dubai or China, he said, they land at LaGuardia or LAX and see rubble: “All over the world, they’re laughing.” Trump has inverted the exceptionalist dogma, repeated by both Obama and his 2012 challenger, Mitt Romney, that the United States is the “envy of the world.” Trump, to be sure, assumes that the whole world is watching the United States—not out of envy, but to mock it.

INSULTING THE WORLD

That Trump is no American exceptionalist is not mere conjecture; he has denounced the concept in no uncertain terms. In April 2015, speaking to Tea Party activists in Houston, he objected to the phrase on the grounds that when Americans tout their exceptionalism, they are “insulting the world.” (Trump had finally found something too offensive to say in public.) The boast also struck him as false, since he believed other countries were “eating our lunch.” To win over the Texas crowd, Trump explained that he would instead like to make America exceptional, by taking back what it had given to the world.

In effect, Trump was not only rejecting exceptionalism, but also redefining it. Whereas previous presidents have taken it to be a permanent trait, and an intrinsic part of American identity, the current president-elect views it as a conditional state. A nation becomes “exceptional” by snatching up more wealth and power than others; it is a status that can be gained one minute and lost the next, and is not reserved solely for the United States. Trump thus recognizes an equality among nations that American exceptionalism denies. Small wonder, then, that he has ruled out promoting democracy abroad. As he

explained, “I don’t know that we have a right to lecture.” In his view, the United States is just one player among many.

But Trump rejects American exceptionalism mainly because he thinks it paralyzes the United States: it prevents the country from playing to win. Under the rubric of Cold War exceptionalism, which cast the United States as the [defender of the free world](#), U.S. leaders rebuilt old enemies such as Germany and Japan, lavished dollars and troops on allies, and set up multilateral institutions to ensure broad-based prosperity. All were immediate sacrifices made for speculative long-term gains distributed across the globe. Yet these were sacrifices the United States was willing to make.

Such considerations are alien to Trump. He asks Americans to seek more immediate victories. Consider his criticism of the war in Iraq: his signature objection is that the United States did not “take the oil” before getting out. For Trump, states are similar because they compete for the same fixed pot of resources. If he manages to disassociate the United States from the hierarchical notion of American exceptionalism, he puts in its place a nationalism that is inherently conflictual.

TRUMPIAN REALISM

Trump’s anti-exceptionalism does not mean he intends to diminish U.S. power. Although he has adopted the slogan “America First,” he scarcely resembles the original America Firsters, who opposed U.S. intervention in World War II. After all, they tended to be outspoken exceptionalists, convinced that the righteous New World had every reason to separate itself politically and militarily from Europe. For them, American exceptionalism furnished an argument against global intervention: if the United States was already destined to come out on top, why get entangled in the world’s squabbles? Trump rejects American exceptionalism mainly because he thinks it paralyzes the United States.

Trump, by contrast, believes the country hasn’t gotten its fair share, and his rhetoric suggests that he may wish to grab that share from others. But whatever actions he takes, his presidency is poised to trigger a [national identity crisis](#). Americans are not accustomed to thinking that theirs is a country like any other, and if Trump continues to spurn exceptionalism, he will damage his government’s credibility domestically, opening up a legitimacy gap that each of the country’s political factions will scramble to fill.

The last time such a legitimacy gap appeared was in the early 1970s, under President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger. Without explicitly renouncing American exceptionalism, Nixon and Kissinger adopted a realist approach that assumed all states behaved in the same manner and pursued comparable interests. This approach had its benefits: it allowed Nixon to pursue détente with the Soviet Union and open relations with communist China, two countries previously seen as implacable foes. But despite its successes, the approach inspired bipartisan criticism. On the

right, neoconservatives agitated against the coddling of the “evil empire” of the Soviet Union. On the left, proponents of human rights laid out new universal principles for the United States to embody and promote. Both sides agreed that exceptionalism was fundamental to national identity—that the United States did have a right to lecture all the rest.

If the past is any guide, Trump won't win many converts to his vision of the United States as “a Third World country.” But he may provoke lasting political realignments. On the right, this will most likely take the form of a resurgence in muscular exceptionalism, which would call Americans to unite in confronting a freedom-hating enemy (perhaps China, Iran, or Russia). Less predictable, but potentially more interesting, will be the opposition from the left. After eight years of deferring to Obama, the left now has an opportunity to get creative. For instance, left-wing Democrats (and some Republicans) may attempt to constrain the power of the executive, as occurred after World War I and the Vietnam War, but after the war in Iraq has not. The left may also attempt to reinvigorate international institutions and use them as counterweights to an erratic leader in Washington.

THE RETURN OF POLITICS