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Contemporary Conservative Constructions of American Exceptionalism

Jason A. Edwards*

Ever since President Obama took office in 2009, there has been an underlying debate amongst politicians, pundits, and policymakers over America's exceptionalist nature. American exceptionalism is one of the foundational myths of U.S. identity. While analyses of Barack Obama's views on American exceptionalism are quite prominent, there has been little discussion of conservative rhetorical constructions of this important myth. In this essay, I seek to fill this gap by mapping prominent American conservatives' rhetorical voice on American exceptionalism.

Keywords: American exceptionalism, conservative rhetoric, jeremiad

In April 2009, President Obama travelled to Europe to meet with European leaders in coordinating a strategy to deal with the global financial crisis and to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the NATO alliance. At a news conference in Strasbourg, France, Ed Luce of the *Financial Times* asked the president whether or not he believed in American exceptionalism. Obama answered by stating,

I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism. I am enormously proud of my country and its role and history in the world . . . we have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality that, though imperfect, are exceptional. Now, the fact that I am very proud of my country and I think that we've got a whole lot to offer the world does not lessen my interest in recognizing the value and wonderful qualities of other countries or recognizing that we're not always going to be right, or that people may have good ideas, or that in order for us to work collectively, all parties, have to compromise, and that includes us. And so I see no contradiction between that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity and recognizing that that leadership is incumbent depends on our ability to create partnerships, because we create partnerships because we can't solve these problems alone.¹

The passage above is a nuanced answer regarding American exceptionalism that received praise from many press circles. Despite this nuance, President Obama's answer, particularly his first sentence, caused a firestorm of controversy amongst conservative

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¹ Barack Obama, "The President's News Conference in Strasbourg," *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/print.php?pid=85959>.

pundits and politicians. For example, James Kirchick, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, states that if “if all countries are ‘exceptional’ than none are, and to claim otherwise robs the word, and the idea of American exceptionalism, of any meaning.”² Monica Crowley argues Obama’s answer is “not exactly the way Mr. Reagan would have answered.” She further notes “President Obama’s reference to British or Greek exceptionalism suggests a belief that the United States doesn’t stand alone with a particular greatness, but that every nation is great in its own way” is a “kaleidoscopic left-wing view, no nation is better than any other, no country can tell another country not to have nuclear weapons, and we’re all socialists now.”³ The *Washington Times* editorial page declares that Obama “doesn’t believe in U.S. exceptionalism.”⁴ Similarly, former Massachusetts Governor and 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney, in his book *No Apology*, accuses Obama of not believing in American exceptionalism and part of his presidential campaign was to restore America’s greatness.⁵ Because of Obama’s rhetoric and policies, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich opines the debate over American exceptionalism would be one of the two or three most important issues in the 2012 presidential campaign.⁶ President Obama is, according to conservatives, eroding the essence of what made America exceptional. This conclusion led Rich Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru to ask in the *National Review*: “what do we, as American conservatives, want to conserve? The answer is simple: the pillars of American exceptionalism. . . The survival of American exceptionalism as we have known it is at the heart of the debate over Obama’s program.”⁷ The question is: what are the pillars of American exceptionalism for conservatives in the age of Obama? For conservatives, what is its nature? How have they come to know American exceptionalism? How can it “survive” if it under assault from Obama’s programs?

These questions are part of a larger intellectual debate that has been raging for the past two years about the importance of and the potential demise of American exceptionalism.⁸ Understanding how conservatives construct American exceptionalism helps us obtain a better grasp of contemporary American political culture and how this discourse creates a dysfunctional political climate within the United States. I am not asserting that only conservatives have created our current argument culture. Liberals are also responsible for the either/or discursive world the public finds itself in, but there can be no doubt

² James Kirchick, “Squanderer in Chief,” *The Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 2009, 23A.

³ Monica Crowley, “American Exceptionalism . . . ; Without Exception,” *The Washington Times*, July 1, 2009, A19.

⁴ “Obama and America’s Decline; The President Doesn’t Believe in U.S. Exceptionalism,” *The Washington Times*, November 10, 2010, 2.

⁵ Mitt Romney, *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2010), 4-8.

⁶ Susan Page, “America’s Place in the World Could Play Part in 2012 Elections,” *USA Today*, December 21, 2010, 1A.

⁷ Richard Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru, “An Exceptional Debate: The Obama Administration’s Assault on American Identity,” *National Review Online*, March 8, 2010, accessed March 9, 2010, <http://nrd.nationalreview.com/article/?q=M2Fhmtg4.html>

⁸ See Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009); Jason A. Edwards & David Weiss, *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press); Newt Gingrich, *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters* (New York: Regnery Publishing, 2011); Geoffrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Sylvia Soderlind and James Taylor Carson, *American Exceptionalisms: From Winthrop to Winfrey* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011).

that contemporary constructions of American exceptionalism have contributed to this political climate in domestic and international affairs. Rhetorical scholars have jumped into the debate analyzing the rhetorical dimensions of President Obama and American exceptionalism.⁹ Yet there have been no projects analyzing conservative constructions of American exceptionalism. Considering conservative reaction to President Obama's exceptionalist discourse, its potential importance in the 2012 presidential campaign, and its importance to American domestic and foreign policy, this project seeks to partially remedy this scholarly oversight by examining the rhetorical dimensions of conservative discourse regarding American exceptionalism in the age of Obama.

To that end, I analyzed a variety of speeches and editorials from prominent conservatives such as Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer, *National Review* editor Rich Lowry, Indiana Representative Mike Pence, *National Review* columnist Ramesh Ponnuru, Florida Senator Marco Rubio, Wisconsin Representative Paul Ryan, and former Pennsylvania Senator and 2012 presidential candidate Rick Santorum, where the subject was specifically about or contained large parts of their analysis concerning the contemporary state of America's exceptionalist ethos. These speeches and editorials provide a cross-section of conservative voices to map their discourse.¹⁰ In the following pages, I examine the rhetorical elements of how conservatives have come to know American exceptionalism and draw implications from this analysis.

Conservative Pillars of American Exceptionalism

American exceptionalism is the distinct belief that the United States is a unique, if not superior, nation when compared to other states, which has a special role to play on the world stage.¹¹ Its intellectual construction, as Jack Greene explains, come from a variety of pronouncements that state the United States is different from Europe and other global powers in the sense that it has a rankless society in which all free people have occupied the same social status under the law and enjoyed an equal opportunity to strive for and gain respect.¹² One of the earliest pronouncements of America's exceptionalist nature can be found in Massachusetts Puritan leader John Winthrop's famous sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity." In that sermon, Winthrop announced to the world that the Massachusetts Bay Colony was a "new Israel" in which immigrants could prosper. The colony would serve as a "shining city upon a hill" for other English colonies (and the world for

⁹ See Jason A. Edwards, "Resetting America's Role in the World: President Obama's Rhetoric of Democratic Exceptionalism." A paper presented at the Obama's Burden Conference at Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, 2010; Robert L. Ivie and Oscar Giner, "American Exceptionalism in a Democratic Idiom: Transacting the Mythos of Change in the 2008 Presidential Election," *Communication Studies* 60 (2009): 361-362; Robert C. Rowland & John M. Jones, "One Dream: Barack Obama, Race, and the American Dream," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 14 (2011): 125-154; David Zarefsky, "President Obama and American Exceptionalism," in *Obama's Burden* ed. by Jennifer Merceica and Justin Vaughn (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁰ My rhetorical map of conservative dimensions of American exceptionalism is not the final word on the subject. Others may find different principles or may disagree with my analysis. I would invite a greater refinement of these rhetorical dimensions by more in-depth study of other conservatives' voices on this important subject.

¹¹ Daniel T. Rodgers, "American Exceptionalism Revisited," *Raritan* 24 (2004): 21-47.

¹² Jack Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 3-5.

that matter) to emulate.¹³ Winthrop's colonial pronouncement, initially reserved solely for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, would eventually become a cultural tenet for the entire United States. Thomas Paine, on the eve of the American Revolution, expressed a similar idea in *Common Sense*, when he wrote that America and Americans had created distinct cultural qualities that made them different from the British other peoples around the world. Because of these qualities they had the power to begin the world again, which gave them license to distance themselves as British subjects and become the masters of their own fate.¹⁴ In 1830, Alexis de Tocqueville published his famous treatise on U.S. representative democracy entitled *Democracy in America*.¹⁵ de Tocqueville's charge was to compare and determine why representative democracy in France and other parts of Europe were failing to take hold, while American democracy thrived. The Frenchman found some "novel" qualities in the American system and American people. These novel qualities led de Tocqueville to be the first person to call the United States "exceptional." Herman Melville expressed in his famous novel *White Jacket* that "we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world."¹⁶

These pronouncements demonstrate that American exceptionalism offers Americans a "mythological refuge from the chaos of history and the uncertainty of life."¹⁷ Deborah Madsen maintains that American exceptionalism is *the* single most powerful agent in a series of arguments that have been fought down through the centuries concerning the identity of America and Americans.¹⁸ America's exceptionalist ethos projects a certain telos where the United States continues to progress, ever attempting to create a "more perfect union." Moreover, America and Americans are special because they are a beacon of light in the darkness for other nations to emulate, but at the same time they are charged with saving the world from itself. Because of its exceptionalist nature, Americans must maintain a high devotion to this destiny or it will be taken away, which will make it an ordinary nation. As Michael Hunt notes, exceptionalism functions to give Americans "order to their vision of the world and defining their place within it."¹⁹ Ultimately, the rhetoric of American exceptionalism produces "a set of related ideas which explain the world and the U.S. role therein."²⁰ The question remains what ideas constitute American exceptionalism for conservatives?

Working inductively, after reading a variety of speeches and editorials from conservatives, I concluded that their rhetoric is largely jeremiadic in nature. The American jeremiad is a narrative used by many rhetors throughout U.S. history that has exceptionalism as its basis. Its origins begin with the Puritans arrival in North America.²¹ Puritans, as noted earlier, saw themselves as a covenant-driven people who had come to the New World to establish a new Israel that would be a "shining city upon a hill." When it was apparent that members of the community or the community at large had committed a

¹³ McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam*, 23.

¹⁴ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1995).

¹⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Mentor Books, 1956).

¹⁶ Herman Melville, *White Jacket* (New York: Aegypan, 2006), 189

¹⁷ Deborah Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 166.

¹⁸ Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*, 2-3.

¹⁹ Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 15.

²⁰ McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 23.

²¹ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

large violation of that contract then the community's minister would issue a jeremiad that would intertwine spiritual guidance and advice on public affairs.²² By the time of the American Revolution, all Americans were considered to be part of a larger covenant, such as Thomas Paine's exhortation that Americans had the power to begin the world over again. This covenant did not exalt allegiance to God, but rather allegiance to secular documents like the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, while the Founding Fathers became god-like figures who bestowed this covenant upon the American people. From that covenant flowed bountiful expectations for the American people. If the United States stayed true to its convention then its citizens would be given the opportunity to live the American dream.

Throughout American history many political figures argued America and Americans strayed from the founding covenant. Consequently, many Americans would not be able to achieve the American dream and the very identity of its citizens was in peril. As a response, rhetors would offer a jeremiad,²³ which is built around three themes.²⁴ First, the rhetor reminds its audience of their covenant. Second, the prophet describes the deviation from that promise and the consequences created from this deviation. Finally, s/he asserts that if people would repent, reform, and return to the hallmarks of the convention then they can still fulfill their overall mission.²⁵ From the rhetor's perspective, the need and want to return to being a "chosen people" would unite citizens to achieve traditional goals. However, because the community could never quite go back to the original covenant the jeremiad functions as a means to create a climate of anxiety so that others act to stop the calamity from recurring.²⁶ In doing so, the jeremiadic message offers ways to rid people of their evil and provide for a time of renewal. Ultimately, as Murphy maintains:

Modern jeremiahs assume that Americans are a chosen people with a special mission to establish a 'shining city upon a hill.' They point to the difficulties of the day as evidence that the people have failed to adhere to the values that made them special, to the great principles articulated by patriots such as Jefferson and Lincoln. The evils demonstrate the need to renew the American covenant and to restore the principles of the past so that the promised bright future can become a reality.²⁷

Over the past two years, various conservatives have articulated similar principles of what they believe American exceptionalism entails and how President Obama is undercutting that vision. My readings of the speeches and editorials put out by conservative intellectuals reveal that there are three pillars of this exceptionalist covenant. The first is that America's exceptionalist ethos flows from the Founding Fathers and the documents (the Declaration of Independence and Constitution) they created. They are sacred vessels that

²² John M. Murphy, "A Time of Great Sorrow: Robert F. Kennedy and the American Jeremiad," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76 (1990): 401-404.

²³ See Kurt Ritter, "American Political Rhetoric and the Jeremiad Tradition: Presidential Nomination Acceptance Address, 1960-1976," *Central States Speech Journal* 31 (1980): 153-171.

²⁴ Michael Stoda and George N. Dionisopoulos, "Jeremiad at Harvard: Solzhenitsyn and the World Torn Apart," *Western Journal of Communication* 64 (2000): 28-52.

²⁵ Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*; Richard L. Johannessen, "Ronald Reagan's Economic Jeremiad," *Central States Speech Journal* 37 (1986): 79-89; Murphy, "A Time of Great Sorrow"; Ritter, "American Political Rhetoric and the Jeremiad Tradition"; Stoda and Dionisopoulos, "Jeremiad at Harvard."

²⁶ Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*.

²⁷ Murphy, "A Time of Great Sorrow," 404.

must be revered and obeyed to the letter. As Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich explains, “American exceptionalism is an idea as old as our country itself. The Founding Fathers understood that the vast resources of our fledging country’s disposal coupled with our puritan roots and lack of a feudal past meant that the United States was uniquely positioned to thrive as an exception to corruption and poverty of other countries.”²⁸ Florida Senator Marco Rubio asserts, “there’s never been a nation like the United States, ever. It begins with our founding documents, principles of our founding documents that . . . embody the commitment to individual liberty, which has made us the freest people in the world.”²⁹ Former Pennsylvania Senator and 2012 presidential candidate Rick Santorum similarly explains that “America is a great country, not because of our government, it’s because our founders founded it a great country.” He further notes, “The Declaration of Independence is the Why of America. It’s who we are. We hear a lot about American exceptionalism. What does that mean? The Declaration tells us.”³⁰ Ultimately, Santorum maintains the founders knew that “establishing freedom, writing it in that document was the easy thing to do. They were students of history and they realized the hard thing to do was to maintain freedom over the course of time, over the course of leaders who try to sing that siren song to give up that freedom in exchange for security.”³¹

Gingrich, Rubio, Santorum, and other conservatives want Americans to be “students of history,” recognizing that the principles conservatives prize the most: individual liberty, sacred nature of life at all stages, personal responsibility, and others all flow from the Founding Fathers and the Constitution. They are the progenitors of American exceptionalism. Accordingly, the founders and the founding documents must be exalted. If one has a fidelity to the Constitution and the memory of the Founding Fathers then that person has an outstanding chance to achieve the implication. This reverence of America’s founding also implies that conservatives and conservatives alone understand the lessons of the Founding Fathers. They are the defenders of American exceptionalism. Therefore, they also have the ability to prescribe what the dimensions of America’s exceptionalist covenant, the dangers to that covenant, and what answers are needed to restore that covenant.

A second pillar of conservative exceptionalism is a reverence for free markets, which entails two sides of a coin—individual freedom to act within the market place and limited governmental intervention of that market. For conservatives, the ability to economically successful begins with recognition that the Constitution laid out rules and guidelines that “made possible the flourishing of the greatest commercial republic in history”³² and made Americans “the most prosperous people in history.”³³ The Constitution created the super-

²⁸ Newt Gingrich, “The Essential (and Exceptional) America,” *Human Events*, December 1, 2010, accessed August 8, 2011, <http://www.humanevents.com/article.php?print=print=yes&id=40290>.

²⁹ Marco Rubio, “Marco Rubio’s Keynote CPAC Speech,” *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2010, accessed March 9, 2010, <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2010/02/marco-rubios-cpac-speech-the-t.html>.

³⁰ See also Paul Ryan, “A Speech on American Exceptionalism,” *Weekly Standard*, June 2, 2011, accessed August 8, 2011, http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/ryan-embraces-exceptionalism-rejects-isolationism-foreign-policy-speech_573194.html.

³¹ Rick Santorum, “2012 Presidential Campaign Announcement Speech,” June 6, 2011, accessed June 24, 2011, accessed <http://blog4president.org/2012/2011/06/rick-stantorum-2012-presidential-campaign-announcement-speech-transcript.htm>.

³² Lowry and Ponnuru, “An Exceptional Debate.”

³³ Rubio, “Marco Rubio’s Keynote CPAC Speech.”

structure for this great “commercial republic” to be achieved, but it was perpetuated on the backs of *individual* hard work and innovation. Florida Senator Marco Rubio made this point even more concrete in a keynote address before the Conservative Political Action Committee where he discussed the story of how his parents immigrated to the United States from Cuba. According to Rubio, his parents followed the traditional immigrant story where they arrived with little money and an inability to fully speak the English language. However, Rubio’s parents had a dream. They worked various jobs, never took government assistance, and through sheer individual effort and perseverance his parents were able to build an economically comfortable life for themselves in Florida. While they never obtained massive amounts of wealth, Rubio suggests that their work ethic gave him the opportunity to achieve greater success within the United States. The story of his parents, led the Florida Senator to the conclusion that in America “it doesn’t matter where your parents were from or where you came from. You can be anything you are willing to work hard to be. The result is the only economy in the world where poor people with a better idea and a strong work ethic can compete and succeed against rich people in the marketplace. Additionally, it has allowed the United States to be the “most reliable defender of freedom in the history of the world.”³⁴ Rubio’s immigrant story becomes a condensation symbol for achieving economic accomplishments. All a person needs, as Rubio’s parents demonstrate, is individual effort, perseverance, and hard work, which will lead inevitably to economic success. Yet in the context of his CPAC address, Rubio’s rhetoric suggests that only conservatives understand what hard work entails. For Rubio, true conservatives recognize that there are no class distinctions between rich and poor. The poor can compete against the rich as long as they have a “better idea” and a “strong ethic.” These people then become businessmen who go out into communities creating more prosperity. It is the prosperity of business that allows the United States to do more for others. As Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels explains “when business leaders asked me what they can do for Indiana, I always reply: ‘Make money. Go make money. That’s the first act of ‘corporate citizenship.’ If you do that, you’ll have to hire someone else, and you’ll have enough profit to help one of those non-profits we’re so proud of.”³⁵ For conservatives, achieving success in business is *the* most important thing that an individual can achieve. It is the greatest act of “citizenship.” Becoming an individual that is successful at business positions the United States to be a global model of economic success, gives non-profits funding to help the downtrodden, and offers the United States the wherewithal to be defender of freedom across the world. Subsequently, businessmen because of the values that they espouse—individual effort, work ethic, personal responsibility, and not taking government handouts—aside from the Founding Fathers should be revered in American society. All agency for economic success comes from individual achievement. The only barrier s/he faces is how that person may carry themselves in the larger economy.

The flip side of this coin is limited governmental intervention into the marketplace. For conservatives, government interference spells a death knell for individual and economic success. In a speech at the Detroit Economic Club on restoring American excep-

³⁴ Rubio, “Marco Rubio’s Keynote CPAC Speech.”

³⁵ Mitch Daniels, “Keynote Speech to the Conservative Political Action Committee,” *American Rhetoric: Online Speech Bank*, February 11, 2011, accessed June 24, 2011, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mitchdanielscpac2011.htm>.

tionalism, Indiana Representative Mike Pence proclaims that what made America exceptional was “the free market, personal responsibility and equality of opportunity.” For this Indiana conservative, all the United States has to do is “choose fiscal restraint, sound money, a flat tax, regulatory reform, American energy, expanded trade and a return to traditional values” and it would “lead us back to the future, back to the West, back to American exceptionalism.”³⁶ Letting the free market “work” and allowing Americans to freely participate in that market without government interference is a major contributor to American dynamism. Deviation from this principle spells disaster for the United States. If there is a deviation from this pillar, then it can only be restored by people that truly understand what makes the United States superior to other states: conservatives. Accordingly, government intervention in the marketplace has no agency for positive good and must be avoided at all cost.

The third and final pillar of conservative exceptionalism is maintenance of American hegemony within the world. According to most conservatives, a central element of U.S. exceptionalism is the maintenance, expansion, and extension of America’s global leadership role. This leadership has been at the heart of American exceptionalism since its founding. According to Rich Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru, “the founders thought we would play an outsized role in the world from the very beginning.”³⁷ Initially, America’s role in the early republic was to be “freedom’s beacon for millions around the world.”³⁸ However, this “outsized role” of global leadership finally took hold until after World War II when the British ceded global leadership to the United States because of a disintegrating economy and internal decay.³⁹ America became “the rarest of geopolitical phenomena: the accidental hegemon.”⁴⁰ It is this position of “accidental hegemon” that the United States has maintained for over sixty years but has, according to conservative logic, created more global stability and freedom to flourish than at any time in the history of the world. Without American global leadership, the world is “a more chaotic place, a place where we have less influence, and a place where our citizens face more dangers and fewer opportunities.”⁴¹ While this hegemony might appear imperialistic, conservatives like Krauthammer, insist the United States has no interest in building a physical empire like Great Britain. Rather, the United States often acts out of interests that go against its own. We maintain our role as global hegemon because there is no other power that can and will promote the values of democracy, freedom, and liberty. To deny that, as Krauthammer seems to suggest some liberals like Obama do, is to deny the advancements of Western civilization.⁴² In short, the United States maintains its leadership position to “defend

³⁶ Mike Pence, “Pence Speech to the Detroit Economic Club,” November 29, 2010, http://www.mikepence.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4392:excerpts-of-pence-speech-to-detroit-economic-club&catid=87:2010-news&Itemid=55

³⁷ Lowry and Ponnuru, “An Exceptional Debate.”

³⁸ Ryan, “A Speech on American Exceptionalism.”

³⁹ Several of the documents I analyzed briefly discuss this ceding of leadership by the British to the U.S. See Gingrich, “The Essential and (Exceptional) American;” Charles Krauthammer, “Decline Is a Choice: The New Liberalism and the End of American Ascendancy,” *The Weekly Standard*, October 19, 2009, accessed March 9, 2010, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/017/0561fnpr.asp>; Lowry and Ponnuru, “An Exceptional Debate;” Ryan, “A Speech on American Exceptionalism.”

⁴⁰ Krauthammer, “Decline is a Choice.”

⁴¹ Ryan, “A Speech on American Exceptionalism.”

⁴² Ryan, “A Speech on American Exceptionalism.”

ourselves and save civilization.”⁴³ Because we are the only nation that can provide true global leadership, there is but one choice: to maintain stability and influence, create more opportunity, and curb dangers, old and new, from arising. In other words, “we must lead.”⁴⁴ By being the global hegemon the United States can maintain the stability of the international system it has helped to build, but also can shape it to further entrench interests (i.e. the spread of democracy and free markets) that Americans have come to articulate as being universal in nature. By implication, if the United States abdicates its role others (i.e. China) could shape the international system in a direction that works against universal principles, jeopardizing our domestic political system, the international community at large, and our exceptionalism, which has been predicated on America being the world’s leader for the past sixty years.

For conservatives, the three aforementioned pillars underwrite how they have come to know American exceptionalism. However, those precepts have been under attack by President Obama and liberals over the past two years. According to their complaints, President Obama wants the United States to retreat from what makes it exceptional. Some conservatives go as far as to suggest that President Obama does not believe in American exceptionalism. Newt Gingrich, one of the more outspoken critics concerning Obama and exceptionalism, continuously argues “the left routinely mocks the idea of American exceptionalism.” According to the former House Speaker, leftists “hate the idea of American exceptionalism because it sets boundaries on the power of the states. The Left’s desire for ever bigger government clashes with the core principles of America.”⁴⁵ *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer and every rhetor that I used in this study quoted the first sentence of Obama’s answer to whether he believes in American exceptionalism. According to Krauthammer, Obama’s answer is an “interesting response.” Obama’s exceptional relativism basically meant that “if everyone is exceptional, no one is.”⁴⁶ Lowry and Ponnuru assert that Obama’s presidency should be “seen in the context of contemporary liberalism’s discomfort with American exceptionalism.” The president has been “unusually detached from history,” denying “the idea that America is an exceptional nation.” Ultimately, “every important aspect of American exceptionalism has been under threat from President Obama.”⁴⁷ According to conservatives’ logic, President Obama’s detachment from history is rooted in his ignorance of American history, the Founding Fathers, or the Constitution. Because the Constitution restricts Obama’s abilities to re-write the rules for America, the president cannot rightly believe in America’s exceptional nature. He must enact policies that fundamentally degrade and destroy America’s exceptionalist ethos.

One of the major areas where President Obama enacts policies that threaten American exceptionalism is toward our free market economy. In the rhetoric I examined, conservatives’ two biggest complaints against the Obama administration is the increased intervention by government into the American economy and the debt load that the United States is piling up during his administration. According to Senator Rubio, President Obama and his allies use the “severe economic downturn, a severe recession as an excuse to imple-

⁴³ Krauthammer, “Decline Is a Choice.”

⁴⁴ Ryan, “A Speech on American Exceptionalism.”

⁴⁵ Gingrich, “The Essential (and Exceptional) American.”

⁴⁶ Charles Krauthammer, “Decline Is a Choice.”

⁴⁷ Lowry and Ponnuru, “An Exceptional Debate.”

ment the statist policies that they have longed for all this time.” As a result, Obama employs America’s economic doldrums to “redefine the role of government in our lives.”⁴⁸ Case in point is the new healthcare legislation that the Obama administration signed into law in 2010. According to conservatives, “Obama’s health-care policy would change the relationship of people to the government, probably forever, by further nationalizing our system.”⁴⁹ Rick Santorum likens the new healthcare law to a drug addiction. According to the former Senator, President Obama’s team admitted to Fox News analyst Juan Williams that “Americans love entitlements and once we get them hooked, they will never let it go.” Then Santorum concludes by asserting President Obama and his allies “want to hook you; they don’t want to free you. They don’t want to give you the opportunity; they don’t believe in you. They believe in themselves, the smart people, the planners, the folks in Washington who can make decisions better than you.”⁵⁰ The new healthcare law is just one means of getting Americans hooked on more government intervention, directly violating what the true nature of American exceptionalism is (less government intervention in the economy). For conservatives, once Americans have their “fix” of big government then they will never let it go. President Obama’s healthcare policy is undermining a fundamental principle of conservative exceptionalism. Accordingly, the new healthcare law, as a microcosm of the new levels of government intervention by Obama, suggests that United States is losing its exceptional nature, and may never be exceptional again because of increased government intervention.

Perhaps a greater problem for American conservatives is the amount of debt that the Obama administration was projected to pile upon the U.S. during his tenure. According to Representative Paul Ryan, “for every dollar we spend thanks to this President, forty cents is borrowed. Forty cents is going to be put on every man, woman, and child to pay the interest on for the rest of their lives.” This debt problem is what he called “the most predictable economic crisis in American history.” For Ryan and conservatives, the United States has a “spending problem” that is “unsustainable” because it will increase America’s debt to “grow to more than three times the size of our entire economy.”⁵¹ Mitch Daniels argues that the United States needs to take on a war footing to address this growing problem, likening America’s amount of public debt as the “new Red Menace.”⁵² The consequence of this level of government spending and piling on of debt by President Obama is that it will lead to the United States catching up “to the European norm for government power.”⁵³ Out of all of the conservative rhetoric, the analogy of America reaching the “European norm” is particularly striking and was made by several conservatives. One tenet of American exceptionalism that the founders put forth was the desire to be qualitatively different from Europe.⁵⁴ Evidence of this can be found in early American foreign policy rhetoric where all presidents argued that the United States would not involve itself in the affairs of Europe. In other words, part of America’s exceptionalism is

⁴⁸ Rubio, “Marco Rubio’s CPAC Keynote Speech;” See also Daniels, “Keynote Speech to the Conservative Political Action Committee;” Gingrich, “The Essential (and Exceptional) American;” Lowry and Ponnuru, “An Exceptional Debate;” Pence, “Speech to Detroit Economic Club.”

⁴⁹ Lowry and Ponnuru, “An Exceptional Debate.”

⁵⁰ Santorum, “Presidential Campaign Announcement Address.”

⁵¹ Ryan, “Speech on American Exceptionalism.”

⁵² Daniels, “Keynote Speech to the Conservative Political Action Committee.”

⁵³ Lowry and Ponnuru, “An Exceptional Debate.”

⁵⁴ McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam*, 8.

that it has always used Europe as a means to measure its differences and not its similarities. According to conservatives, President Obama flips that aspect of exceptionalism on its head. President Obama no longer wants us to be different, but wants us to be similar to Europe. Therefore, how can the United States truly consider itself exceptional if it is like other nation-states? For conservatives, the answer is that it cannot. The increase in spending, the increase in the U.S. debt burden, and government intervention into the economy all serve as overwhelming evidence that Obama is trying to obliterate conservative, if not American, exceptionalism.

Not only are Obama's policies, according to conservatives, destroying American exceptionalism at home, but also undermining the United States' ability to be a global hegemon. America's economic problems are tearing down our global leadership.⁵⁵ However, the president engages in foreign policy activities that also serve to undermine America's station in the world. The greatest indictment of Obama's foreign policy has been Charles Krauthammer's polemic "Decline Is a Choice." According to Krauthammer, American decline or the appearance of decline on the international stage is not a result of "imperial overstretch" or the natural rise of other powers like China, India, and Brazil growing in economic stature. Rather, President Obama is choosing American decline.⁵⁶ For Krauthammer, practically everything Obama has done in his foreign policy contributes to the feeling of overall decline. For example, Krauthammer noted that America's decline "begins with the demolition of the moral foundation of American dominance." One example of this demolition was where President Obama made a "hajj" to Prague, Ankara, Istanbul, and Cairo where he proceeded to indict "his own country for arrogance, for dismissiveness, and derisiveness (toward Europe), for maltreatment of natives, for torture, for Hiroshima, for Guantanamo, for unilateralism, and for insufficient respect for the Muslim world. Consequently, this "confessional foreign policy"⁵⁷ "effectively undermined any moral claim that America might have to world leadership."⁵⁸ Instead of viewing these confessions as obtaining more credibility, particularly moral, with Europe and the Middle East, Krauthammer views them as a sign of weakness. Krauthammer's rhetoric suggests that as the "global hegemon" the United States must never apologize for mistakes made. This kind of rhetoric makes America look weak and undermines its ability to project its power and its moral authority.

Obama's "apology" tour⁵⁹ is only one of many complaints that have come from conservatives, particularly Krauthammer, about the president's foreign policy. Conservatives complain that the United States is engaging in too much multilateral activity, moving away from the principle of unilateral action that was a hallmark of President Bush's for-

⁵⁵ Daniels, "Keynote Speech at the Conservative Pacific Action Committee;" Krauthammer, "Decline Is a Choice;" Lowry and Ponnuru, "An Exceptional Debate;" Rubio, "Marco Rubio's Keynote CPAC Speech;" Ryan, "A Speech on American Exceptionalism;" Santorum, "Presidential Campaign Announcement Address."

⁵⁶ Krauthammer, "Decline Is a Choice."

⁵⁷ See Jason A. Edwards, *Navigating the Post Cold War World*, 138-140; Edwards, "Resetting America's Role in the World."

⁵⁸ Krauthammer, "Decline Is a Choice."

⁵⁹ See Glenn Kessler, "The Obama Apology Tour," *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2011, accessed June 24, 2011, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/fact-checker/2011/02/obamas_apology_tour.html.

eign policy.⁶⁰ They maintain he has mishandled the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and gotten us into a quagmire in Libya.⁶¹ They criticized his attempts to downsize America's nuclear arsenal with the signing of the new START treaty with Russia. They argue that Obama has mistreated America's allies, turned his back on free trade, and coddled the Chinese government too much.⁶² The latest and greatest complaint against President Obama's program of international affairs is how his administration mishandled the "Arab Spring" as peoples in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and Libya attempt to overthrow autocratic regimes on their own terms, not with the dictates of outside powers like the United States.⁶³ Conservatives argue that Obama has been waffling on his commitment to democracy in the Middle East and should have been more forceful in offering assistance to pro-democracy forces in the aforementioned countries.⁶⁴ For conservatives, Obama is an isolationist in interventionist clothing. Ultimately, the president constructed a "foreign policy designed to produce American decline—to make America essentially one nation among many."⁶⁵ For conservatives like Krauthammer, Ryan, Rubio, and the 2012 presidential candidates, as long as President Obama is in office America's role as global hegemon will continue to decline. Under his presidency, the United States is surrendering and abdicating its global leadership position. Subsequently, the United States' ability to project its power will decline, as well as its leadership. In short, President Obama has put the United States on the fast track to destroying American exceptionalism.

Despite President Obama's attempts to retreat from the pillars of American exceptionalism, America's conservatives argue that conservative—I mean American—exceptionalism can be restored. The first step, as Senator Rubio asserted, is to "understand what's happening."⁶⁶ Through their expression of American exceptionalism's pillars and their jeremiadic rhetoric, conservatives are attempting to educate the public about the Obama administration's plans for America. From this position of understanding the solutions offered by conservative politicians are fairly conventional involving curtailing spending, governmental regulation and intervention in the economy, reducing taxes, and getting America's debt problem under control for the long-term.⁶⁷ As Representative Pence states, "to restore American exceptionalism, we must end all this Keynesian spending and get back to the practice of free market economics," which entails the aforementioned activities.⁶⁸ Internationally, the United States must "renew our commitment to the

⁶⁰ Daniels, "Keynote Speech to the Conservative Political Action Committee;" Pence, "Speech to Detroit Economic Club."

⁶¹ Krauthammer, "Decline Is a Choice;" Lowry and Ponnuru, "An Exceptional Debate;" Ryan "A Speech on American Exceptionalism."

⁶² Krauthammer, "Decline is a Choice;" Ryan, "A Speech on American Exceptionalism."

⁶³ Ryan, "A Speech on American Exceptionalism."

⁶⁴ Devin Dwyer, "Republican Hopefuls Critique Obama on Egypt," *ABC News*, February 2, 2011, accessed August 2, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/egypt-protests-obama-response-draws-criticism-gop-presidential/story?id=12821036>; Jennifer Rubin, "Criticism of Obama's Middle East Speech is Swift," *The Washington Post*, May 19, 2011, accessed August 2, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/post/criticism-of-obamas-middle-east-speech-is-swift/2011/03/29/AF68rL7G_blog.html.

⁶⁵ Krauthammer, "Decline Is a Choice."

⁶⁶ Rubio, "Marco Rubio's Keynote CPAC Speech."

⁶⁷ Daniels, "Keynote Address at the Conservative Political Action Committee;" Lowry and Ponnuru, "An Exceptional Debate;" Pence, "Speech at the Detroit Economics Club;" Santorum, "Presidential Campaign Announcement Address."

⁶⁸ Pence, "Speech at Detroit Economics Club."

idea that America is the greatest force for human freedom the world has ever seen; a country whose devotion to free enterprise has lifted more people out of poverty than any economic system ever designed; and a nation whose best days still lie ahead of us.” This renewal comes through maintaining our role as global hegemon by continuing strong defense spending, renewing friendships and alliances with rising democratic powers Brazil and China, further integration of China into the global economic and political system, and to stop apologizing for past mistakes in U.S. foreign policy.⁶⁹ If these steps are taken America’s exceptional nature can be revived and restored, but it must involve a repudiation of President Obama and a return to conservative exceptionalist pillars.

Conclusions

The goal of this essay has been to examine the rhetorical dimensions of conservative exceptionalism, particularly as it relates to the belief that President Obama is debasing and destroying the United States’ exceptional character. I have argued that conservatives’ primary rhetorical tool is to magnify the discussion of American exceptionalism through the lens of the jeremiad. Considering many conservatives believe the United States is abandoning its exceptional character since the election of President Obama, a jeremiadic logic should not be a surprise because the jeremiad is used by rhetors who believe that evil has befallen the American people and they want to restore the U.S. to its original covenant. That said, what are some implications of conservative exceptionalism?

First, the pillars of conservative exceptionalism can be viewed as reinforcing one another, but at the same time they point to a closed paradigm towards other views regarding American exceptionalism. Joe Klein remarks that the first Republican presidential debate was instructive. The candidates locked themselves in an ideological straitjacket that was “about the size of Rush Limbaugh’s radio studio.”⁷⁰ Similarly, the pillars of conservative exceptionalism are an ideological straightjacket that allows no room for compromise. For example, under a conservative exceptional logic, America’s Founding Fathers and its founding documents (e.g. the Constitution) are sacrosanct that cannot be questioned. They must be revered even if those men and documents contain specific flaws that should be highlighted, discussed, and debated amongst a variety of peoples. Case in point was 2012 Republican presidential candidate Representative Michelle Bachmann’s insistence that the Founding Fathers “worked tirelessly to end slavery.” When confronted with the inaccuracy of her statement by ABC’s George Stephanopoulos, Bachmann stood by her statement regarding her claim about the Founding Fathers and slavery.⁷¹ Despite the fact that most Founding Fathers owned slaves and slavery was included in the Constitution, many conservative pundits and bloggers came to Bachmann’s defense. For example, conservative commentator Mark Levin attempted to bolster Bachmann’s argument by noting that an original provision of the Declaration of Independence proclaimed slavery to be an abomination and that Founding Father George

⁶⁹ Krauthammer, “Decline Is a Choice;” Lowry and Ponnuru, “An Exceptional Debate;” Rubio, “Marco Rubio’s Keynote CPAC Speech;” Ryan, “A Speech on American Exceptionalism.”

⁷⁰ Joe Klein, “Outsiders vs. Insiders: The Struggle for the GOP’s Soul,” June 16, 2011, *Time*, accessed August 2, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2077962-2,00.html>.

⁷¹ Kase Wickman, “Bachmann Stands by Claims that ‘Founding Fathers’ Ended Slavery,” June 28, 2011, accessed August 2, 2011, <http://www.rawstory.com/rawreplay/2011/06/bachmann-stands-by-claims-that-founding-fathers-ended-slavery/>.

Mason, although he was a slave owner, was vehemently against the institution after the Constitutional Convention. Levin concludes by stating, “Bachmann is right and Stephanopoulos is foolish. These flaky journalists really should get their facts and history right before playing the gotcha game, or it might come back to bite them thanks to a fact-checker like me.”⁷² Certainly, there were some founders that opposed slavery and did work to undermine the institution’s existence. Yet to suggest that because some opposed the institution they then worked “tirelessly” to end it is historical simplification at best. The more important point of this example is that under a conservative exceptional logic, the pillars they put forth become infallible conclusions that must be obeyed to the letter. There is no debate, there is no compromise. If those principles are questioned not only is one considered mistaken, but that person cannot consider America exceptional because they do not truly understand what makes America truly extraordinary. Therefore, it becomes much more difficult to negotiate on larger policy questions, such as government regulation of the private sector or the closing of military bases abroad, which make governing even more intractable. This might explain the current inability of many within the Tea Party movement to compromise not only with Democrats, but with Republicans, as well. The pillars of conservative exceptionalism are part of the larger struggle for the soul of the Republican Party.

That struggle may be most evident with the principle of maintaining American hegemony. In the introduction, I alluded to the debate over American exceptionalism over the past two years. The primary critique of American exceptionalism has been that it led the United States to engage in imperial overstretch. According to critics of our interventionist foreign policy, the United States is stretched too thin abroad. We are spending billions of dollars on military installations, fighting two wars, protecting various parts of the world (e.g. Europe), and getting little in return for our efforts. Moreover, foreign policy strain has been the source of a major decline at home because we do not have the financial wherewithal to deal with our domestic problems because of international commitments. One might expect this critique from the left side of the political spectrum, but some of the most vociferous criticism actually comes from within conservative circles. For example, conservative historian Andrew Bacevich has constantly condemned America’s foreign policy. According to Bacevich, the United States should not build its foreign policy around intervening in other nations, attempting to spread democracy where our efforts may be thwarted (e.g. Afghanistan). The result of this foreign policy has been increased amounts of debt, increased political tensions, and increased acrimony from states across the world.⁷³ Similarly, 2012 Republican presidential candidate Representative Ron Paul has made similar arguments about American foreign policy for years. Representative Paul argues that interventions like the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts are folly. They have cost the United States too much in terms of blood and treasure and are unconstitutional to boot. Paul wants a return to the foreign policy of the Founding Fathers, where the United States did not interfere in the affairs of other states and our connections were merely

⁷² Mark Levin, “George Stephanopoulos: Flake,” June 28, 2011, accessed August 2, 2011, <http://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-levin/george-stephanopolous-flake/10150221375725946>; Jeffery Lord, “Levin: Stephanopoulos is Foolish in Lecturing Bachmann,” *The American Spectator*, June 28, 2011, accessed August 2, 2011, <http://spectator.org/blog/2011/06/28/levin-stephanopoulos-is-foolis#>.

⁷³ Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*.

commercial in nature.⁷⁴ Representative Paul's views on foreign policy are shared by a number of Tea Party activists. Foreign policy analyst Walter Russell Mead argues that the current state of America's foreign policy has factionalized the conservative movement into the Palinite and Paulite wings of the party. The Palinite wing favors an active, interventionist foreign policy, where the United States maintains a global hegemon. The Paulite wing, however, "combines a firm belief in American exceptionalism with deep skepticism about the nation's ability to create a liberal world order."⁷⁵ In other words, Paulites are directly opposed to a fundamental aspect of conservative exceptionalism. While Ron Paul has little chance of winning the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, his views on foreign policy and the support he receives from much of the Tea Party movement has caused a vociferous debate within conservative circles over the nature of America's role in the world. The principle of America as global hegemon might be in danger. America's imperial overstretch has the potential to fracture and factionalize the conservative movement, undermining the rhetorical dimensions of its exceptionalist logic. The Paulite challenge to this principle of conservative exceptionalism may spell huge changes in American foreign policy in terms of how, where, and why the United States might intervene with military force, its involvement with international organizations, international trade, and what role it takes on the world stage.

In this essay, I attempt to account for one aspect of the debate surrounding American exceptionalism by examining the rhetorical dimensions of contemporary conservative voices on American exceptionalism. Considering conservatives oppose most of President Obama's political agenda it should be no surprise that their rhetoric emphasizes a jeremiadic logic. More importantly, this jeremiad reveals important pillars of what constitutes conservative exceptionalism, which lay the groundwork for their political and rhetorical agenda. Whether or not conservative constructions of American exceptionalism are its proper dimensions I will leave to others to decide and debate. What is undoubtable is that the United States faces, to paraphrase former President Jimmy Carter, a crisis of confidence. That crisis has a variety of dimensions to it, but one aspect of it is certainly the nature of American exceptionalism, whether it exists, and how do we go about enacting that exceptionalism. That is a debate that has far reaching implications for the direction of American policy at home and its relationship with the world. In a more complicated global environment the debate over American exceptionalism and its trajectory is one that every American and every person should discuss.

⁷⁴ See Jason A. Edwards, "Debating America's Role in the World: Representative Ron Paul's Exceptional Jeremiad," *American Behavioral Scientist* 55 (2011): 253-269.

⁷⁵ Walter Russell Mead, "The Tea Party and U.S. Foreign Policy," *The New York Times*, February 21, 2011 accessed August 2, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/22/opinion/22iht-edrusselmead22.html?_r=1.