

American Exceptionalism, U.S. Foreign Policy, and the 2012 Presidential Campaign

By [Jason A. Edwards](#) on December 10, 2011

In April 2009, President Obama travelled to Europe to conduct his first European tour, attend a NATO summit, and celebrate the 60th anniversary of that organization. While giving a press conference in Strasbourg, France, Obama was asked by a *Financial Times* reporter if he, like his predecessors, believed in American exceptionalism. The president began his answer 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."^[1] Although Obama went on to profess he thought America's core set of values were "exceptional" and that the United States was and still is the leader of the free world, those pronouncements did nothing to quell the controversy generated from his so-called equivocation about American exceptionalism. Immediately, American conservatives criticized Obama for not believing in American exceptionalism.^[2] Two of those conservative voices, Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich, are the leading contenders in the Republican presidential primaries. Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, in his book *No Apology*, accused Obama of not believing in American exceptionalism and part of his presidential campaign was to restore America's greatness.^[3] Similarly, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich argued President Obama, and liberals for that matter, do not understand American exceptionalism. He further observed the debate over American exceptionalism will be one of the two or three most important issues in the 2012 presidential campaign.^[4]

This debate is not likely to subside any time soon. Consider the recent Republican presidential debates where viewers can witness how those candidates lace their rhetoric with varying references to American exceptionalism. While this subject may not reach the importance of economic or defense policy, the rhetoric surrounding exceptionalist ethos will underwrite policy pronouncements throughout the 2012 presidential campaign, particularly in U.S. international relations. Accordingly, I'd like to spend the next few paragraphs discussing this debate occurring in two places: within Republican presidential primaries and how that debate might play out 2012 general campaign. Before that discussion, however, I begin with a short explanation of what constitutes American exceptionalism.

Understanding American Exceptionalism

American exceptionalism is the belief the United States is unique, if not a superior nation to other states.^[5] This is one of most powerful agents in a series of arguments that have been passed down through the centuries concerning the identity of America and Americans. America's exceptionalist ethos functions to offer a "mythological refuge from the chaos of history and the uncertainty of life."^[6] It is fundamental to the national and international identity of the U. S. because it projects a certain telos where the United States continues to progress, ever attempting to create a *more perfect union*. Because of exceptionalism, America moves in a constant upward pattern where it remains the beacon of light in a world shrouded in darkness, while having the charge of defending of the rights of man as long as it exists. Consequently, America and Americans are special because they are charged with saving the world from itself, and at the same time, must maintain a high level of devotion to this destiny.^[7] As Michael Hunt noted, exceptionalism functions to give Americans "order to their vision of the world and defining their place within it."^[8]

The belief in America's exceptional status is widely agreed amongst Americans. Yet there has been a long historical debate about how to *enact* that exceptionalism, particularly approaching international affairs. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger noted that American foreign policy and its accompanying rhetoric has always had at its heart a tension between those who would argue that; "America serves its values best by perfecting democracy at home, thereby acting as a beacon for the rest of mankind"^[9] with those that maintain; "America's values impose on it an obligation to crusade for them around the world."^[10] Proponents of these two divergent approaches to U.S. foreign policy are known as exemplarists and interventionists.

Exemplarists define America's role in foreign affairs as "standing apart from the world and serving merely as a model of social and political possibility."^[11] In order for the United States to fulfill its special destiny it should engage in activities that make itself a beacon for others to emulate. Activities that create this model of "social and political possibility" include perfecting American institutions, increasing material prosperity, integrating diverse populations, and striving for more civil rights. As America perfects its domestic situation it

becomes an even greater symbol for nation-states to copy. The image of an exemplar nation is how the United States fulfills its destiny to influence the affairs of the world. However, proponents of this mission also argue that achieving and maintaining an exemplar status is a full time job. To do more (such as meddling in the affairs of other states) would not do much good for those nations or for the United States because it puts an undue burden upon the American people.

Summing up exemplarist anxieties, historian H.W. Brands noted that, “in attempting to save the world, and probably failing, America could risk losing its democratic soul.”^[12] For proponents of the exemplar mission, the United States stands as a beacon of freedom, not as a force that intervenes in the affairs of other states. In this sense, America’s mission of exemplar acts as a deterrent to getting heavily involved with other nation-states, which protects America’s body politic.

On the other hand, interventionists argue the United States must project exceptionalism through active engagement of the world not only economically, but politically, culturally, and socially.^[13] Interventionists assert the world has fundamentally changed since the early days of the republic when exemplarist ideas gained favor over America’s international conduct. In the modern era, the United States has largely helped to build a global environment that has more democracy, more freedom, more integration, more interconnectedness, and less conflict than ever before. American involvement with the world has only enhanced its exceptionalism, not undermined it. Because of that, the United States must defend what it has helped to build or it will undermine its status as an exceptional nation, as well as the global order in general. Accordingly, interventionists maintain the United States’ exceptionalist heritage requires it to take responsibility for leading the world in continued progress and defending those who subscribe to similar ideals. Ultimately, this interventionist mission underwrites the American role as “leader of the free world.”

Throughout American history, exemplarists and interventionists have been at odds as to what the proper role in the United States should be.^[14] It seems to be at its greatest apex when there is great transition and anxiety about America’s position in the world. With the global economic crisis; an American people weary of war; high debt and unemployment at home; the constant drumbeat that the United States is in decline; constant discord amongst its politicians; and polarization of the political discourse within the United States – it is no wonder that this debate has manifested itself in 2012. For our purposes here that debate has been most starkly found within the Republican presidential primary fight and most likely will spill over into the 2012 general election.

An Exceptional Debate Within Republican Circles

Michigan Republican Senator Arthur Vandenberg famously noted that “politics stops at the water’s edge.” According to conventional wisdom, Vandenberg’s words rang true, particularly after World War II where the United States turned away from focusing on domestic affairs to engaging in a much more prominent global leadership role. Beneath the surface of this supposed truism is a much more complicated story of arguments concerning America’s global position in the Democratic and Republican parties. The debate within Republican circles is one the GOP has fought amongst itself for almost a century. During the Senate debate over the League of Nations Republican opposition to joining the League was not uniform, varying amid differing camps of senators. In one camp were senators, such as Hiram Johnson of California, who opposed joining the League of Nations at all costs.^[15] No amount of concessions could have made Johnson and his irreconcilables give up their exemplarist position, a position they asserted was the only *true* U.S. foreign policy because it was how the Founding Fathers dealt with international affairs.^[16] For Johnson and others, that foreign policy had worked for over hundred years of America’s existence; thus, there was no point in abandoning it now. In another camp were senators, like Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, who were ardent internationalists, but were not willing to endorse joining the League until sufficient guarantees were made protecting U.S. sovereignty over certain areas of policy (e.g. immigration).^[17] If President Wilson had made those concessions it is very possible the Senate would have easily approved the treaty.

Exemplarists dominated Republican foreign policy rhetoric up until World War II. Because of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the rise of the Soviet Union it is often assumed that all exemplarists suddenly had a change of heart and endorsed an interventionist foreign policy; thereby, making Vandenberg’s wisdom ring true. Yet there was vehement opposition among Republicans after World War II against the United States taking up a much larger role in foreign affairs. Ohio Senator Robert Taft was the biggest voice against the United States taking an active role in global affairs. Taft was reluctant for America to join the United Nations; had serious reservations about the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan; opposed the U.S. joining NATO; and was a vocal critic of involvement in the Korean War.^[18] Although, Taft failed to win the debate over these policies and failed to win the 1952 Republican presidential nomination his beliefs on foreign policy and his supporters caused massive headaches for the Truman and Eisenhower administration within Congress. As such in U.S. foreign policy, politics has never really stopped at the water’s edge.

Fast forward to present day and the debate between exemplarists and interventionists continues. The debate is, as it always has been, over how the United States influences the affairs of the world and the means used to influence in. The two most prominent exemplarists are former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman and Texas Representative Ron Paul. Paul and Huntsman maintain America's example as a great nation is sufficient for a global leadership role. Both men have continuously argued in the Republican primary debates that the United States needs to curtail, particularly militarily, its global position abroad. Both men advocate the United States begin to leave Afghanistan immediately and that the United States needs to reconsider its positioning of military forces around the world. Both are advocates of repositioning and even bringing home American military forces that remain in Europe and other nations.

If Ron Paul had his way he would abandon what he asserts is America's penchant for empire. Under Paul's foreign policy, the United States would return to a non-interventionist foreign policy where the U.S. would abandon most, if not all, military installations abroad; end our membership in international organizations; keep American military forces on American soil; and proscribe U.S. contact with the world would be over matters concerning trade and not much else.^[19] Huntsman is not as radical in cutting most ties within foreign affairs, but he would dramatically reduce America's military commitments abroad, reduce some involvement in international organizations, and increase focus on diplomacy and trade, particularly in Asia, which is his area of expertise. Huntsman has advocated he would focus much more of his energy on rebuilding the American economy because that will increase the global perception that the United States is a nation to emulate. In turn, this emulation assures, revives, and restores America's greatness.

Interventionists, like Governor Romney and Speaker Newt Gingrich as well as the other candidates, favor a much more muscular approach to foreign policy, going so far as to continually invoke President Reagan's foreign policy mantra of "peace through strength." These candidates, all favor increasing the defense budget; curtailing foreign aid and some cases cutting it altogether; getting tougher on rogue nations like Syria, North Korea, and Iran through increased sanctions and potential military action; rethinking and potentially reducing involvement with the United Nations; actively promoting democracy abroad; and using whatever means necessary to fight and potentially expand the war on terrorism.^[20] According to these Republican presidential candidates, in order to maintain and continually promote the spread of democracy, as well as deal with emerging threats from across the world, the United States must continue and extend its role as a world leader. Interventionist Republican presidential candidates describe exemplarists, like Representative Paul and Governor Huntsman, as naïve "isolationists" who do not understand the modern integrated and interconnected world the United States faces. To abandon our leadership position would undercut U.S. influence and diminish America's exceptionalist ethos.

The 2012 General Presidential Election

It is more than likely that the interventionist position amongst Republicans will carry the day in the presidential primaries. Despite the fact that Obama continually advocates the United States must maintain its global leadership position, the likely Republican nominee will argue Obama does not believe in and/or does not operate in a way that promotes American exceptionalism. Based on the criticisms leveled at the Obama administration over the past three years, this debate is most likely to center upon two areas: the basic belief in American exceptionalism and President Obama continuing to "apologize" for U.S. foreign policy.

First, many Republican candidates argue President Obama does not believe in American exceptionalism. In his recently published book, *A Nation Like No Other*, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich is an unabashed enthusiast of American exceptionalism. He promotes the idea that America is the greatest country in the world. That greatness flows from America's founding documents and the wisdom of the Founding Fathers, something which Obama and other liberals either deny the greatness of America or do not understand what makes the United States truly great.^[21] Gingrich criticizes Obama's foreign policy as having the United States "leading from behind," which "not only violates American Exceptionalism, it is the precise antithesis of American Exceptionalism."^[22] Thus, the American people must do something to overcome this leadership deficit, which would be to elect a Republican to restore America to its exceptional status one more.

A second area that might be part of the exceptional debate is President Obama's "apologizing" for the United States to other nations. I have previously argued that President Obama, like President Clinton and President Bush, has employed a rhetoric toward other nations that I call confessional foreign policy.^[23] Confessional foreign policy is where a president does not issue a full apology toward a nation, but does admit that the United States has made mistakes in some of its policy positions. At the same time, the president puts forward policies and proposals that will correct these past mistakes. One example of the confessional foreign policy can be found in Obama's attendance at the 2009 Summit of Americas held in Trinidad and Tobago. Immediately prior to the trip, President Obama published an op-ed in the Washington

Post where he admitted:

“Too often, the United States has not pursued and sustained engagement with our neighbors. We have been too easily distracted by other priorities and have failed to see that our own progress is tied directly to progress throughout the Americas.”[\[24\]](#)

One day later, Obama struck a similar tone at the opening ceremony of the Summit, observing:

“I know that promises of partnership have gone unfulfilled in the past, and that trust has to be earned over time. While the United States has done much to promote peace and prosperity in the hemisphere, we have at times been disengaged, and at times sought to dictate our terms.”[\[25\]](#)

Obama has also confessed America’s “sins” toward Europe, the Middle East, and India. This rhetoric, actually helps Obama rebuild relationships with regions and nation-states across the world that have been damaged by American hubris and self-interest, much like it did with Clinton and Bush. It enhances American exceptionalism because the U.S. is willing to admit its mistakes, learn from them, and take a leadership position that would try to mitigate that wrongdoing in the future. As Obama put it,

“if we are practicing what we preach and if we occasionally confess to having strayed from our values and our ideals, that strengthens our hand; that allows us to speak with greater moral force and clarity around these issues.”[\[26\]](#)

Republican presidential candidates and conservatives in general have derided Obama’s apology tours.[\[27\]](#) For example, Mitt Romney observed that Obama’s apologies undermine U.S. leadership because they make the United States look weak. Consequently, rogue nations and terrorist groups will think the United States is soft and not willing to engage in a fight. In confessing America’s “sins” Obama is not promoting the greatness of America. As a result, it undercuts our leadership abroad, which diminishes America’s exceptionalist ethos. Romney has pledged to never to apologize for America, consistently promote its greatness, and engage in policies at home and abroad that make the United States the envy of the world.[\[28\]](#)

Finally, there will also be a definite debate over the specific means Republicans and Democrats would emphasize in their foreign policy, but as most observers have noted, many presidents, whether they be Democrats or Republicans, maintain and emphasize similar items in U.S. foreign policy. More than likely, as indicated in the campaign, Republican candidates will advocate a much more muscular foreign policy, where it appears that the Defense Department is the primary face of American global affairs; whereas Obama will continue to emphasize a much more multilateral approach to foreign affairs. While these differences are significant and important, one can detect the true differences in the debate over American exceptionalism in the subtle nuances both parties pronounce about America’s role in the world.

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The debate over American exceptionalism has only just begun. It appears to be at its apex during times of anxiety and crisis within the American polity. Hence, the current state of affairs in America makes the 2012 election season such a juncture. The task for informed citizens is to see where the ebb and flow of this debate will continue, how it affects domestic and foreign policy, and how it influences our relationship to the world around us.

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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>.

- [2] See Jason A. Edwards, "Contemporary Conservative Constructions of American Exceptionalism," *Contemporary Rhetoric* 1 (2011): 40-54.
- [3] Mitt Romney, *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 4-8.
- [4] Susan Page, "America's Place in the World Could Play Part in 2012 Elections," *USA Today*, December 21, 2010, 1A; see also Newt Gingrich, *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters* (New York: Regnery Publishing, 2011).
- [5] Daniel T. Rodgers, "American Exceptionalism Revisited," *Raritan* 24 (2004): 21-47.
- [6] Deborah Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 166.
- [7] Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*, 2-3.
- [8] Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 15.
- [9] Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 17.
- [10] Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 17.
- [11] Paul T. McCartney, "American Nationalism," 401.
- [12] H.W. Brands, *What America Owes the World: The Struggle for the Soul of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), viii.
- [13] Denise M. Bostdorff, *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crisis* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994).
- [14] See Jason A. Edwards, *Navigating the Post Cold War World: President Clinton's Foreign Policy Rhetoric* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008); Jason A. Edwards, "The Fight Over the League of Nations: Rhetorical Tension in America's Exceptionalism Narratives," *Ohio Communication Journal* 47 (2009): 265-282; Jason A. Edwards, "Debating America's Role in the World: Representative Ron Paul's Exceptionalist Jeremiad," *American Behavioral Scientist* (2011): 253-269.
- [15] See Karl K. Schonberg, *Pursuing the National Interest: Moments of Transition in Twentieth Century American Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).
- [16] Edwards, "Debating America's Role in the World."
- [17] Edwards, "Debating America's Role in the World."
- [18] Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry Truman and the Orgins of the National Security State 1945-1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Julian E. Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy: The Politics of National Security—From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).
- [19] Edwards, "Debating America's Role in the World."
- [20] Edwards, "Contemporary Conservative Constructions of American Exceptionalism."
- [21] Gingrich, *A Nation Like No Other*; Edwards, "Contemporary Constructions of American Exceptionalism."
- [22] Gingrich, *A Nation Like No Other*, 178.
- [23] Edwards, *Navigating the Post Cold War World*; Jason A. Edwards, "Resetting America's Role in the World: President Obama's Rhetoric of Democratic Exceptionalism," in *Obama's Burden* ed. by Jennifer Mercieca and Justin Vaughn (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, forthcoming).
- [24] Barack Obama, "Op-Ed by President Obama: 'Choosing a Better Future in the Americas,'" April 16, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Op-ed-by-President-Obama-Choosing-a-Better-Future-in-the-Americas, paragraph 2.
- [25] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the Summit of the Americas," *The American Presidency Project*, April 17, 2009, paragraph 4.
- [26] Barack Obama, "President Obama Holds News Conference at End of Latin Summit," *Congressional Quarterly Politics*, April 19, 2009, <http://www.cqpolitics.com/wmspace.cfm?docID=news-000003098429>,

paragraph 36; emphasis mine.

[28] Romney, *No Apology*, 4-8.

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