

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Oana-Andreea PIRNUȚĂ

Transilvania University, Braşov, România

In an interconnected world where foreign relations matter not only for resources or military alliances but also for cultural relationships, it is highly important to have a better understanding of the power relations among nations. The information carries certain meanings that have important outcomes thus defining the power of a given nation. Foreign policy is the channel through which global politics is exercised. International politics is a hierarchy of power being determined by important cultural, economic as well as geographical aspects. The reasons and strategies that are used in order to reach the outcomes in global politics represent the focus of the present paper. The United States has been the leader in international politics since the early 20th century due to its vast resources and wealth as well as its cultural output. America's interest in preserving a democratic and free world has its foundation in the beliefs and values it stands for the aim of this paper is to question whether or not there is a concrete premise for the idea of American exceptionalism.

Key words: *foreign policy, the United States of America, exceptionalism, power, culture, politics, global, relations.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The US foreign policy as far back as the War of 1812 has been about taking measures to protect the economy in order to control and make use of the wealth for further progress. The American history and identity have solid foundations in culture.

The present paper aims at questioning whether or not there is a concrete premise for the idea of American exceptionalism.

2. AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM – ETYMOLOGY, ORIGINS AND DEFINITION

American exceptionalism can be perceived as a unified principle common for narratives and ideas in

American politics and culture being enrooted in social and traditional history.

2.1. Etymology and origins

The phrase “American exceptionalism” was coined by Stalin, however, the key term “exceptional” referring to the United States dates back in history to Alexis de Tocqueville who described the American people as being different from the European one – an exceptional people with exceptionally enlightened social ideas (Tocqueville, 2010:768). Tocqueville analyzed New England life and

government whereas Stalin probably meant the opposite – Americans are not a deviation from the norm. According to Tocqueville Americans are historically European by origin, harboring European enlightened ideas, but a distinctive way of applying them in the social structure. A unified national awareness of themselves through the guarding of the essence that constitutes their historical, cultural and traditional identity (Tocqueville, 2010:755). Stalin calls it “American exceptionalism”.

2.2. Defining the concept of “American exceptionalism”

It is very difficult to cover the whole meaning behind the phrase “American exceptionalism”. A diachronic approach is needed as it offers a better understanding by means of the proper context throughout the centuries.

Exceptionalism is a political tool which was used from George Washington to Ronald Regan for both internal and foreign purposes. It is a tool of rhetoric connecting the American people through a shared identity.

John Winthrop is associated with Puritanism and he is considered to be the founder of Massachusetts Bay Colony - one of the first permanent English settlements in America. John Winthrop was the first to convey

the general meaning of American exceptionalism in his religious speech defended to his congregation focusing upon their mission being the chosen people of God. Thus, the Puritans established a permanent English settlement on the American soil under theocratic rulership (Schmidt, 2008:284), that is, a settlement ruled by religious leaders. Winthrop ends his sermon with the following words: “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us” – an image that is characteristic of the American exceptionalism, a model for the others, the predestination of Manifest Destiny and the American Creed (McCrisken, 2003:1).

American exceptionalism is the conviction that the US holds a prominent place among the developed countries in the world for its treasures in Western history standing for the center of enlightened ideas and democracy. America’s distinctiveness from the European politics, culture and philosophy confers its power. It is about national identity as Deborah Madsen states. “American exceptionalism permeates every period of American history and 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” (Madsen, 1998:1).

The religious basis for exceptionalism was extrapolated against the Native Americans with the westward movement, the ever expanding frontier. American exceptionalism coincides with the rise of the US as a global power.

3. AMERICAN HARD AND SOFT POWER THROUGH THE LENS OF EXCEPTIONALISM

When talking about global politics we must refer to the issue of power. Foreign policy making is a negotiation of power, a dialogue of giving and taking, it is about relations among nations. Power can be present in many shapes and forms.

The source of power is context dependent for example in the wealth of resources or military strength. Joseph R. Nye on soft power states that “holding a winning poker hand does not help if the game is bridge” (Nye, 2004:3),

that is, a given resource is useless if it does not influence the outcome of the play.

Power can have its origins in resources such as, economy and culture, thus, having different goals. He who holds the high card in the right game establishes the different types of relationships.

Hard power may refer to military political maneuvers or financial sanctions on a given country: for instance, in 2003 the Iraq war caused

worldwide American popularity. But wars are no longer a feasible solution for foreign policy problems.

Soft power is the product of culture and openness of a given country. Cultural exports such as music, film and television carry the meaning implicitly. Hollywood is present everywhere. It is highly important to know to use the cultural values in order to be able to conduct the home and foreign affairs. Power is subliminal, but effective.

4. THE INFLUENCE OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

I suggest a questionnaire consisting of 8 questions about the topic debated in the present paper. It is written in a multi-choice system with three options to choose.

4.1. QUESTIONNAIRE

Here is the questionnaire consisting of 9 questions:

1. Do you think that America has a special destiny in world history?

a) Yes, the United States is qualitatively exceptional as compared to any other nation or empire in history;

b) No, America is not particularly dissimilar when compared to other nations;

c) America is different in comparison to other well developed

nations, however, not necessarily extraordinary.

2. Do you agree with the depiction of rich patriotic imagery and the mythologizing of American history in popular discourse?

a) Yes, it is part of the American identity;

b) No, it is slightly arrogant providing an irrational sense of self pride;

c) Other.

3. Do you think that America is an essential force for good in the world?

a) Yes, ignoring the negative sides, America has a net positive influence on world affairs;

b) No, meddling with foreign affairs is too controversial, as such the negative aspects are much more apparent (think of Iraq or Afghanistan);

c) Other.

4. Did the United States fight a just war in Vietnam or Iraq?

a) To obtain justice, most of the times the military intervention is necessary;

b) Morality cannot be defined by aggressive actions;

c) I do not know.

5. Do you think America should continue to lead the |Free World”?

a) Yes, I think America is well equipped for the job considering its history and principles;

b) No, America should step aside and listen more closely to what the others have to say;

c) Neither, America should focus upon domestic problems.

6. In your opinion, does America owe its power to its cultural or military exports?

a) The US has a large influence abroad in terms of cultural exports, such as: brands, films, music and television;

b) The US carved out its sphere of influence with demonstrating military strength (Mexican-American War, WWII, Korea, etc.);

c) Other.

7. Would you say that positive opinion makes American influence abroad stronger?

a) American cultural ubiquity in foreign countries determines the opinion of others through attraction, thus power is established;

b) Influence is gained through resources and policies constructed and applied at home.

c) I do not know.

8. What do you think about the domestic political discourse? Is it a factor to consider when weighing global influence?

a) Yes. Home policies are reflected in foreign policy which, in turn, influences the opinion of the other;

b) No. Home policies are not as visible outside as other facets of

power, such as: brands, films, music (culture). As a result, it is not much of an influential factor.

c) I do not know.

4.2. SUBJECTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

In total there are 106 recorded subjects. The vast majority refers to American nationals standing for 77 respondents representing 73%. 7% are British, 6% are Australians and 8% Canadians. The rest of 6% is represented by various other respondents who identify themselves as Dutch, Pakistani, Chilean, Finnish and German.

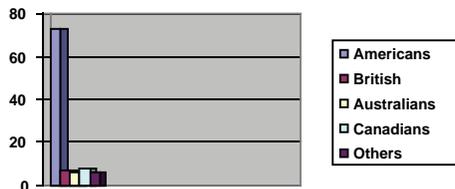


Fig. no. 1. Subjects' Nationality

Under the age group category, 48% fall into the 21-30 range with 51 individuals, followed by the 15-20 category with 27% standing for 29 respondents, closely trailed by the 31-45 age group with 18%, the remaining 7% consisting of 6 people belonging to the 45-59 age group with one person claiming to be above 60 years of age.



Fig. no. 2. Subjects' Age

Concerning the occupation of the subjects, it is worth to mention that 46% or 49 respondents are still students whereas 54% or 57 have careers in fields such as: IT, engineering, business, education, health, government, retail.



Fig. no. 3. Subjects' Occupation

On the political spectrum, 68% recognize themselves as Left leaning at 72 respondents, 17% Right leaning at 18 individuals and 15 % who claim to be Moderates, Statists and Independent.



Fig. no. 4. Subjects' Political Spectrum

4.3. THE INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS

The first inquiry addressed to the respondents asked whether in their opinion America has a special role in world history. The reason for this question is to see if Reagan's attitude – that of maintaining a deep devotion to the ethos which translated into the public conscience – is still reflected after his first speech as president making reference to Winthrop's sermon. Only 12 respondents think that the United States is qualitatively exceptional as compared to other nations standing for 11% of the total number of respondents. The majority, that is, 61% consider that America is not necessarily extraordinary, however, still intrinsically different. 28% feel that America is not particularly exceptional regarding Reagan's words being the "beacon of hope" (Reagan, 1981).

The second question moves to identify the early US history treated as myths. 66% or 70 respondents agree that it is a slightly arrogant

nation which only serves of self pride. Only 23% or 24 respondents disagree considering that it is part of American identity and it should be treated as a source for patriotism. The remaining 11% argue that even if it may seem arrogant, it is not different from the other cultures.

The third question refers to America as an essential force for good in the world. 49% of the respondents consider that the United States has had many missteps in the pursuit of such a vision. Only 27% consider that even if these issues were not beneficial in the short run, the long term brought a positive outcome. Most, about 63%, however, think that even though the US is a strong force, it has too many negatives to be the essential force for good in the world. 10% are those who had other opinions: America does both good and bad being left with in a neutral position, the US interests occupied the pole position in the world, the US should not be the world police.

The fourth question "Did the United States fight a just war in Vietnam or Iraq?" 98 respondents representing 92% agree that violence is not the answer to obtaining justice. Only 8% or 8 respondents think that sometimes it is necessary to use force to secure interests.

The next question seeks to find out if the US is well equipped to lead the Free World. 43% responded that

America should listen more rather than do its own thing. 42% consider that America should rather focus on domestic problems. Only 15% agree that the US should continue to lead the democratic world.

The sixth question deals with hard and soft power 22% consider that its power is due to the military strength and 74% of the respondents believe that the nation as a whole has a defining power abroad in the cultural sense. 4% have mixed feelings considering that America’s power might have been gained through cultural imperialism brought on by the success of the war campaigns.

The seventh question analyzes whether soft power had been created in the foreign countries rather through cultural attraction than by attracting the home policies practiced at home. 53% or 56 respondents believe that the domestic policies play a very important part in coopting others to like America. 47% or 50 respondents consider a cultural explanation as the best answer to the question.

The eighth question tries to find out if the domestic policies have a direct influence on the foreign policy. 69% of the respondents recognize the importance of the policies exercised at home as having a clear connection with foreign policy and 31% conclude that the cultural discourse has a higher rate of influence abroad.

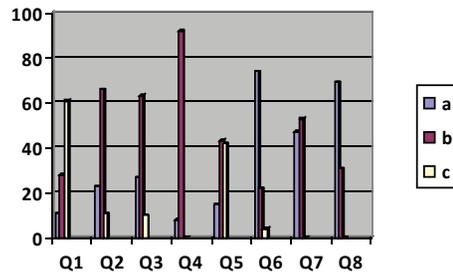


Fig. no. 5. Interpretation of the Results

I avoided surveying the respondents directly on the issue of American exceptionalism. Of course, the idea itself is there within the key words. The first five questions have exceptionalism in mind.

The US is unique in the world history, however, it does not undoubtedly mean that it is also extraordinary. The leading opinion resigns the notion of exceptional.

More respondents believe in pacifism and not in aggression. More subjects think that America should neither lead nor trail when it comes to global politics. However, the United States has a rich influence abroad especially due to its culture.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Foreign policy is correlated with American exceptionalism. Identifying it as an impulse of American identity, exceptionalism plays an important part in the US society.

Even though Tocqueville has defined it in the 19th century, exceptionalism is a dynamic ideology.

The 20th century saw its rise as a way to define American democracy versus Soviet totalitarianism, a clear-cut distinction that was highlighted by the Cold War. Exceptionalism explains why America is exceptional as well as describes the nature of this order.

The questionnaire shows that most Americans do not believe that their country is exceptional. They consider that the historical explanation of American exceptionalism is based on a mythologized depiction of history, upon a romanticized portrayal of history.

REFERENCES

[1] Madsen, Deborah L. (1998) *American Exceptionalism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

[2] McCrisken, Trevor B. (2003) *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam-US Foreign Policy 1974*. Palgrave Macmillan.

[3] Nye, Joseph S. Jr. (2004) *Soft Power: The Means to Success in Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.

[4] Reagan, Ronald (1983) Address to the Nation on the Program for Economic Recovery. In: *University of Texas Archives*. Trans., September 24, 1981, <http://reagan.utexas.edu>

[5] Schmidt, Ronald J. Jr. (2008) In the Beginning, All the World Was America: American Exceptionalism in New Contexts. In: Dryzek, John S., Honig, Bonnie & Phillips, Anne (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, Volume I, New York: Oxford University Press.

[6] Tocqueville, Alexis de (2010) *Democracy in America*. Ed. Nolla, Eduardo. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.