

# Reverting to Form

## American Exceptionalism and Human Rights after 9/11

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### Abstract

America’s ongoing “War on Terror” and its policy and attitudes on human rights in particular have become the subject of intense public controversy since 9/11. The focus on what changed after 9/11 can be deeply misleading, however, as it tends to obscure the broader context and significance of recent developments, especially in connection with the international human rights regime. In this essay I shall argue that American policy and attitudes on human rights are returning to their Cold War form. Framing the problem this way provides important analytic leverage into three related problems which are the primary focus of this essay. The first is the controversial idea of American exceptionalism; I develop an interpretation of this concept that helps to explain the style of messianic engagement that typified the Cold War and resonates throughout the War on Terror. The second problem concerns the distinctiveness of the period between the end of the Cold War and 9/11, when this style changed – and with it, American policy and attitudes on human rights. I argue that during this period there was significant progress in strengthening the normative core of the international human rights regime. This progress was not caused by the shift in American views, but it was facilitated by that shift. Finally, building on these insights, I argue that while in many respect the international human rights regime remains strong after 9/11, the US-led War on Terror poses a significant threat to the normative progress that characterized the regime throughout the long 1990s.

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## **Reverting to Form: American Exceptionalism and Human Rights after 9/11**

America's ongoing "War on Terror" and its policy and attitudes on human rights in particular have become the subject of intense public controversy since 9/11.<sup>1</sup> Many observers agree that American policy changed radically after the terrorist attacks; there the agreement ends. Scholars and commentators are divided about the nature of the change and the reasons for it. To advocates of the new policy, this change signaled a reinvigoration of American resolve and a return to freedom and democracy as guiding principles of foreign policy, while to critics it heralded the beginning of a unilateralist or even imperial phase of American engagement. What supporters of the administration see as a return a morally-grounded foreign policy is viewed by opponents as hypocrisy, rhetorical cover for more sinister ambitions. Among the many sources to which these changes have been attributed are imperial arrogance {Boggs, 2004 #951}; {Judis, 2003 #942}; {Panitch, 2003 #1031}, the burdens of growing American hegemony {Ignatieff, 2003 #1032}; {Kagan, 2002 #1034}, the influence of religious conservatives (e.g., {Boyer, 2004 #940}; {Oldfield, 2004 #1036}; {Zunes, 2004 #1035} and neoconservatives (e.g., {Boyle, 2004 #937}; {Boot, 2004 #1037} in the G.W. Bush administration, and quite simply, the fear experienced by the American public.

Without denying the importance of understanding the nature and sources of recent changes in US policy, I want to emphasize that the focus on what changed after 9/11 can be deeply misleading, as it tends to obscure the broader context and significance of recent developments, especially in connection with the global human rights regime. In this

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<sup>1</sup> The use of scare quotes here indicates that the "war on terror" is deeply controversial as policy and rhetoric. I shall dispense with them hereafter, but the tendentious and ideologically fraught nature of the term should be borne in mind.

essay I shall argue not simply that American foreign and human rights policy after 9/11 has changed significantly but that it is *reverting to form*. In its style and substance, American policy in the War on Terror has come to resemble American policy during the Cold War, exhibiting a familiar pattern of American exceptionalism. Framing the problem this way provides important analytic leverage into three related problems, which shall be my primary themes in this essay. First, it highlights the controversial and often rather confused concept of American exceptionalism. The idea of a *return to* exceptionalism suggests an interval or interregnum, suggests *variation*, in contrast to typical treatments that regard exceptionalism as a fixed trait of American behavior or attitudes. This focus emphasizes two important shocks to the international system and the period between them, what Thomas Risse has neatly called “11/9 to 9/11” – the dozen years from the collapse of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.<sup>2</sup>

The second problem I shall focus on concerns the distinctiveness of this period, with respect both to US policy and to the development of the global human rights regime. I shall argue that the human rights regime expanded and strengthened significantly during “the long 1990s,” especially in normative terms.<sup>3</sup> This progress, I contend, is linked directly to key changes in US policy and attitudes, changes which were themselves shaped by American exceptionalism and instigated by the transformation of the international system following 11/9. Finally, I shall argue that America’s reversion to form jeopardizes the important normative achievements of the 1990s. While it is too

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<sup>2</sup> James Der Derian (2003 p. 448 n. 11) attributes the phrase to Risse.

<sup>3</sup> “The long 1990s” pays homage to the eminent British historian Eric Hobsbawm, who used the term “the long 19<sup>th</sup> century” to remind readers of the arbitrary and potentially misleading features of conventional periodization schemes (decades, centuries) while simultaneously suggesting the value of alternate schemes based on important continuities and changes {Hobsbawm, 1989 #213} {Hobsbawm, 1996 #334}.

soon to say that this reversion has had a significant impact on the international human rights regime, it does prompt serious and well-founded concerns about the durability and robustness of the human rights framework developed throughout the long 1990s. The essay concludes with some speculation about what might be done to fortify and preserve the regime in light of these threats.

### **Varieties of Exceptionalism**

When I discussed this paper with a colleague from my former university, he told me about a study group on American exceptionalism that had formed on campus. The group met only a few times before disbanding; apparently its members could not agree on what American exceptionalism was or even whether it existed. The group's fate nicely illustrates the contested and contentious nature of American exceptionalism; the concept means different things to many people – including, to some, nothing at all. It has been used promiscuously of late, littering mainstream magazines and newspaper op-ed pages as well as scholarly books and journals. It is invoked to praise or blame a range of policies, including the Bush Administration's human rights policy, its doctrine of preemption, and its wider war on terror.

One of the difficulties in any discussion of American exceptionalism is the ambiguity surrounding the concept itself, ambiguity illustrated by these varied uses of it. Much of the disagreement about American exceptionalism, though hardly all, originates in the different understandings of it invoked by scholars and commentators. I want to distinguish among three different exceptionalist theses, theses that, despite some overlap, are reasonably distinct and have quite distinctive implications. I shall refer to these

theses as *historical* exceptionalism, *behavioral* exceptionalism, and *cultural* exceptionalism. *Historical* exceptionalism refers to claims about America's unique historical origins and development. It is primarily associated with arguments about the absence of socialism in America, arguments citing the lack of a feudal past, abundant land, diversity among the working classes owing to immigration, and a variety of other factors (e.g., {Lipset, 1996 #930}). More generally, historical exceptionalism looks for explanations of differences between America and the rest of the world (typically, Europe); in the constellation of facts and attributes that mark what Tocqueville, who first referred to America as exceptional, called the "point of departure" {Tocqueville, 2000 #262}.

{Shafer, 1991 #933} writes in the preface to a recent edited volume that "American exceptionalism, summarized, is the notion that the United States was created differently, developed differently, and thus has to be *understood* differently – essentially on its own terms and within its own context." Numerous analytic difficulties beset scholarly efforts to assess America's historical exceptionalism (see {Shafer, 1999 #1078}). There is also a logical problem: it does not follow that a country with distinctive historical origins and trajectories poses epistemological problems different from those attending comparative studies generally. But once the claim about special epistemological treatment evaporates, historical exceptionalism reduces to the rather trivial claim that different nations have different pasts and that these pasts matter for our understanding of those nations. The claim is trivial because practically no one disagrees. Besides, there is nothing distinctively American about it: all nations are in this respect

“exceptional.” Noticing this point, {Kammen, 1993 #946} has called for “comparative exceptionalism” as a historical approach.

A second claim found frequently in the literature refers to *behavioral* exceptionalism, the thesis that America’s actions, policies, and endeavors in international affairs are unique or distinctive. Behavioral exceptionalism is an empirical hypothesis, and in this respect it often overlaps with the historical thesis just described. Michael Ignatieff identifies three types of exceptionalist behavior in the arena of human rights (though these types of behavior might apply more generally). *Exemptionalism* refers to the American habit of negotiating multilateral agreements and regimes only if they allow exemptions for American citizens and practices; of attaching reservations to treaties and conventions; of delaying or refusing to ratify conventions at all; and, of refusing to provide for the implementation of those agreements it does sign and ratify in domestic law {Ignatieff, 2005 #936}. *Double standards* refers to America’s habit “of [judging] itself by different standards than it uses to judge other countries and [judging] its friends by standards different than those it uses for its enemies” {Ignatieff, 2005 #936}. Finally, *legal isolationism* describes the attitudes of American courts towards human rights standards and jurisprudence of other countries and of the international community {Ignatieff, 2005 #936}; cf. {Koh, 2003 #938}; {Ignatieff, 2002 #953}. Each of these claims concerns how US policies and actions are unique or different from those of other countries.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> {Lepgold, 1995 #947} finds little empirical support for American (behavioral) exceptionalism and raises questions about how it might be differentiated from hegemonic exceptionalism. In the area of human rights, as the contributors to {Ignatieff, 2005 #954} demonstrate, there is ample evidence of exceptionalist behavior (though Lepgold’s analytic quandary remains unresolved).

A third variant of the exceptionalist thesis is *cultural* exceptionalism. Cultural exceptionalism refers, loosely, to claims about the traits, beliefs, habits, and attitudes of Americans concerning their world and their place in it. It is this version of exceptionalism that I shall be concerned with here – or at least, with one interpretation of it in the American context, which I call *providential exceptionalism*. Providential exceptionalism refers to a commonplace American belief that theirs is a chosen nation, one upon which Providence has bestowed special blessings and which has been charged with a special world-historical mission to cultivate and promote its values. Providential exceptionalism is frequently conflated with both of the other kinds of exceptionalism. It has an obvious historical dimension: originating with the earliest British settlers in North America, its evolution can be traced through several centuries of American religious and later political rhetoric. Despite this historical aspect, providential exceptionalism is not a claim about how things are or about how they were; it is a claim about how Americans have thought about how things are and were. If, as Kammen suggests, every country is different, America’s difference might consist in this distinctive belief in its own difference; such a belief is itself a crucial fact of American history (Howe, cited in {Kammen, 1993 #946@27-8}). Providential exceptionalism attempts to understand what motivates or shapes or informs America’s exceptionalist behavior; it emphasizes the reasons animating American actions and attitudes rather than their uniqueness. In particular, I am interested in how America’s self-understanding as a chosen nation – a “city upon a hill” in Winthrop’s famous phrase – influences its policy and attitudes with respect to human rights.

## **Providential Exceptionalism**

And as for ourselves here, the people of New England, we should in a special manner labor to shine forth in holiness above other people; we have that plenty and abundance of ordinances and means of grace, as few people enjoy the like. We are as a city set upon a hill, in the open view of all the earth; the eyes of the world are upon us because we profess ourselves to be a people in covenant with God... (Bulkeley, cited in {Madsen, 1998 #931@19}).

John Winthrop's compelling image of America as a "city upon a hill," invoked here by Peter Bulkeley, is among the most familiar in the iconography of America (see Winthrop in {Miller, 1956 #959@83}). It conveys the divine origins and burdens of the American "experiment" (another frequently invoked term), what the noted historian Perry {Miller, 1956 #932} has called the "errand into the wilderness." The colonists of Massachusetts Bay perceived that "as Puritans they were charged with a special spiritual and political destiny: to create in the New World a church and society that would provide the model for all the nations of Europe as they struggled to reform themselves" {Madsen, 1998 #931@1-2}. This perception, partially secularized and explicitly politicized, forms the core of providential exceptionalism after the American founding.

America was to be a "redeemer nation" that would quite literally save England from its corruption by imparting to it a pure form of Church polity. The colonists' separation from the domineering Stuart monarchy and hostile Anglican clergy provided the physical and spiritual distance necessary for developing this polity, which would be transported to and implemented in England when conditions permitted {Miller, 1956 #932@11-12}; cf. {Madsen, 1998 #931@ch. 1}. From Winthrop's famous shipboard speech through the election sermons preached in the wilds of New England, Miller demonstrates that this first generation understood its "errand" in these redemptive, forthrightly political terms. Of course, the experiment might go wrong: as Winthrop

reminded his brethren on board the *Arabella*, a city on a hill is visible to all, but it can serve either as beacon or as warning. The possibility of failure weighed heavily on the Puritans, especially after seemingly propitious developments in England after 1647 took a profoundly discouraging turn: Cromwell, in an effort to sure up his wobbly political coalition, opted for general toleration rather than rule of the saints. With the prospect of reform in England thus destroyed, the errand lost its immediacy, leaving subsequent generations to struggle with its meaning and significance {Miller, 1956 #932@13-15}.

There seems little point in multiplying examples of speeches and sermons dedicated to the theme of this Puritan errand; they are familiar and ubiquitous. Two points deserve special emphasis, however. The first is that, contrary to common perceptions depicting Virginia “cavaliers” as the opposites of their rigidly Calvinistic New England cousins, both branches of the family shared a providential understanding of their purpose in America. If the divine mission of the Virginia Company remains mysterious to us modern observers – for whom its avowedly commercial nature and reliance upon slavery seem like dubious qualities in a holy endeavor – it was perfectly clear to the Virginians {Miller, 1956 #932@99-140}. They too understood themselves as “a peculiar people, marked as chosen by the hand of God” (John Rolfe, cited in {Bellah, 1975 #929@40}). The founders of Jamestown were convinced of the harmony of their evangelical and entrepreneurial missions. “When the English undertook to plant colonies in America, they commenced – whatever they ended with – not with propositions about the rights of man or the gospel of wealth, but with absolute certainties concerning the providence of God” {Miller, 1956 #932@115}. Recovering this fact about the founding of Virginia is important because it dispels a common misperception about the reach and

influence of Puritanism in colonial North America and establishes the broad foundations of providential exceptionalism.

The second point to emphasize is that the Puritans held a rather strange (to us) view of liberty, one linked directly to their understanding of covenant. The subtleties of this complex doctrine, which arose in response to the Arminian heresy, lie beyond the scope of this essay, but a brief sketch reveals how providential exceptionalism influences American thinking about freedom. Calvinist theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were struggling to explain why people should strive for salvation or regulate their behavior when God, in his wise but inscrutable way, preordains salvation for the elect and perdition for everyone else. The trick was to show why people ought to be good while nonetheless preserving inviolate God's absolute sovereignty with respect to salvation, to show people persuaded of justification by grace why "complete disregard of moral performance" was unacceptable {Miller, 1956 #932@89}. The rather ingenious solution was the "covenant of grace." Simplifying madly: God made a covenant with Adam, and later with Noah and his sons, promising salvation if they had faith and strived to follow the law. God voluntarily submits to this binding agreement, making the terms and requirements of salvation plain, but His reasons for doing so remain beyond mortal ken. Humans must endeavor to live up to those requirements, to uphold their side of the bargain. Of course, that God might grant or withhold the wherewithal required to keep the covenant means that the behavioral conundrum is not fully resolved, but at least on this version out piety and successes indicate something about His otherwise mysterious intentions and soothes the anxious.

The covenant of grace underpins a distinctively American view of liberty, and ultimately, democracy. Liberty, as Winthrop defined it, is of two kinds: there is natural liberty to do whatever one likes, which humans share with animals, and there is civil or federal liberty, which governs moral and political covenants: “this liberty is the proper end and object of authority and cannot subsist without it; and it is a liberty to that only which is good, just, and honest” {Miller, 1956 #959@92}. Winthrop illustrates the concept by reference to a woman’s selection of a husband: she makes a free choice, but in doing so submits her will entirely. Her subjection is, in his words, “in a way of liberty, not of bondage.” Authority must be suffered, on this analogy, because of its instrumental role in helping people realize redemption; those who chafe at this yoke, pleading their natural liberty, misunderstand that true liberty is liberty to submission and salvation. The social covenant is subordinate to the covenant of grace; conformity with the latter is the sole purpose of the former. By submitting to the terrestrial government of ecclesiastical magistrates, the shepherds of God’s flock, the people establish an authority submission to which becomes the most likely means of salvation. Wise and Mayhew later argued that human reason renders such submission unnecessary and illegitimate since all people can know for themselves what salvation requires, moving covenant doctrine in a democratic direction, yet both always insisted that freedom should only be used to behave rightly, to fulfill God’s larger purposes {Miller, 1956 #959@121-43}. Still, this “rationalist” innovation transformed election of magistrates from an affirmation into a genuine choice, helping to harmonize Calvinist tenets with Enlightenment principles.

Understanding the federal conception of liberty dispels a common fallacy regarding the link between American exceptionalism and the country’s unwillingness to

submit to international laws, treaties, and organizations. Often this reluctance is attributed to a peculiar American devotion to popular or constitutional sovereignty (e.g., {Ignatieff, 2002 #953}; {Rabkin, 1998 #977}; {Spiro, 2000 #1038}). This view not wrong, but it is underspecified: many democratic countries hold popular sovereignty as an appropriate standard of legitimacy, and many are much less hostile to supranational authority than the United States. The distinctively American reluctance to submit to such authority stems rather from the understanding of federal liberty and covenant. Americans' apparent fascination with their sovereignty is less a function of any infatuation with the popular will than of their recognition of this mechanism's importance in affirming and realizing the nation's divine purposes. Put differently, it is America's special duty to use its freedom for the right purposes that renders submission to international or multilateral authority suspect.

This is not to say that providential exceptionalism provides any guarantee of the infallibility of the popular will. On the contrary, collective failures to use freedom wisely, to carry out the providential errand, call down divine wrath which, much like parental punishments, reaffirm God's love and plan even as they demonstrate his immediate displeasure. As {Madsen, 1998 #931@25} observes, this theme finds expression in a literary genre of "captivity narratives," in which colonists kidnapped by Indians but subsequently reunited with their European communities interpreted their experiences as metaphors for the communities' sins. Mary {Rowlandson, 1682 #1083} wrote in a characteristic passage that

I can but stand in admiration to see the wonderful power of God in providing for such a vast number of our enemies in the wilderness, where there was nothing to be seen, but from hand to mouth. Many times in a morning, the generality of them would eat up all they had, and yet have some further supply against they

wanted. It is said, "Oh, that my People had hearkened to me, and Israel had walked in my ways, I should soon have subdued their Enemies, and turned my hand against their Adversaries" (Psalm 81.13-14). But now our perverse and evil carriages in the sight of the Lord, have so offended Him, that instead of turning His hand against them, the Lord feeds and nourishes them up to be a scourge to the whole land.

God provides for the enemies of His people, using those enemies as instruments of punishment and correction. On this view, which still resonates today, America's trials confirm its providential character even as they point to its present failings.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Puritan ideas about the migration to America had entered mainstream discourse, offering an influential rhetorical context for the political events that followed. As {Bailyn, 1992 #935@32} describes, "...in the minds of the Revolutionaries the idea, essentially worked out in the sermons and tracts of the settlement period, [was] that the colonization of British America had been an event designed by the hand of God to satisfy his ultimate aims." This idea was promoted in history books "found everywhere" in the colonies, solidifying the widespread notion "that America had a special place, as yet not fully revealed, in the architecture of God's intent" {Bailyn, 1992 #935@33}. Preaching the new democratic interpretation of covenant, the New England clergy fomented sentiment for independence. In these ways, the language of errand or experiment was translated into a rationale for republican government.

This rationale was reiterated by many leading figures in the struggle for independence. John Adams wrote that "I always consider the settlement of America as the opening of a grand scheme and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth" (cited in {Bellah, 1975 #929@33}). This world historical importance made the American experiment's success vital: as Samuel Williams put it, "in our destruction liberty itself

expires and human nature will despair of evermore regaining its first and original dignity” (cited in {Bailyn, 1992 #935@140}). George Washington felt that nothing less than “the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered... [as] staked on the experiment intrusted [sic] to the hand of the American people” (cited in {Bellah, 1975 #929@33-4}). As {Bailyn, 1992 #935@140} concludes, “this theme, elaborately orchestrated by the colonial writers, marked the fulfillment of the ancient idea, deeply embedded in the colonists’ awareness, that America had from the start been destined to play a special role in history” (cf. {Ross, 1995 #958@22}). That role, at least as the founders understood it, was to nurture and defend liberty and democracy and promote their diffusion across the globe.

In the 19th century, this American errand was translated into the ideology of manifest destiny {Madsen, 1998 #931@89ff.}. Herman Melville, himself skeptical of America’s direction, wrote that “we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world” (cited in {Bellah, 1975 #929@38}; cf. {Madsen, 1998 #931@81}). John {O’Sullivan, 1839 #1082} argued that “the far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High – the Sacred and the True.” Rabbi Isaac Wise’s speech honoring Washington and his contemporaries as “the chosen instruments in the hands of Providence, to turn the wheel of events in favor of liberty forever...” makes the transition from chosen people on a noble errand to manifest destiny apparent. Rabbi Wise argues that “nothing can arrest our progress, nothing drag our country down

from her high place in history, except our own wickedness working a willful desertion of our destiny, the desertion from the ideal of liberty” {Bellah, 1975 #929@41}. His words show how easily the idea of a special role in securing liberty slides over into an entitlement to “progress” and a “destiny” of expanding liberty. It also shows the enduring strength of the idea that only deviation from the path of Providence, only abuse of liberty, can displace America from its special historical role. Finally, it illustrates that providential exceptionalism, while rooted in a particular Puritan understanding, had become a secular (or at least ecumenical) national belief. That belief finds expression in the words of Walt Whitman, whose celebration of America as “a great test or trial case for all the promises and speculations of humanity and of the past and present” exudes the boundless confidence, optimism, and exceptionalism that characterized the national creed in the 19th century (cited in {Bellah, 1975 #929@139}).

Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is the most famous piece of exceptionalist rhetoric from the 19th century. Lincoln interprets the founding as a democratic act: the founders had “brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” In conceiving the Civil War as a test of this democratic enterprise, Lincoln follows exceptionalist form: if the Union fails, government “of the people, by the people, for the people” would “perish from this Earth.” Speaking four months after his Gettysburg speech but with the tide having turned in the Union’s favor, Lincoln offer a classic exceptionalist reading of war’s scourges:

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray,

that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

The city on the hill is an example to the world both in glory and in shame. In describing slavery as a moral stain for which the Civil War was God's angry punishment, Lincoln followed a long abolitionist tradition that began with the Quakers and continued through William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, and the early civil rights and feminist movements. Crucially, this view is of a piece with Lincoln's treatment of the war as a test of democratic governance: if a democracy cannot do the right thing, if liberty does not culminate in submission to God's divine will, failure and punishment by trial follow. The conflagration thus reaffirms America's special role in a sort of purgative, purifying sense.

I want to clarify that providential exceptionalism is not a claim about Americans' religious views. While it develops from the Puritan understanding of a divine errand, this religious dimension fades with time – although it is undeniable and unnecessary to deny that for many Americans providential exceptionalism retains much of its original theological flavor). Nor is providential exceptionalism an ideology; that term denotes a conscious, comprehensive political doctrine. It is perhaps best described as a "para-ideology" or "collective belief system" {McEvoy-Levy, 2001 #1071@5ff}. It is more diffuse, less doctrinaire, and less systematic than ideology. It denotes a distinctive and commonplace belief among Americans that the United States is a special country with a special historical role to play in the drama of liberty and democracy. This belief is widespread if not always conscious; its familiarity in American political rhetoric both reflects and reinforces its pervasive reach across the political spectrum. It is also

important to stress that the concept of providential exceptionalism says nothing about whether America really does have the special role the idea describes; it is only a claim about Americans' belief in a distinctly American errand, a special role in perfecting and promoting liberty and democracy. America is an example to the world, a model to be emulated, and one whose success is crucial to freedom's very survival.

### **Providential Exceptionalism and Messianic Engagement**

In this section I turn from the substance of providential exceptionalism to consideration of how it affects the style and orientation of American international policy – especially in areas related to human rights. Let me stress again that in developing this framework I conceive providential exceptionalism as a para-ideology and treat it as a social fact; I take no evaluative position on this style and orientation at this point. My goal is mainly to show what we would expect American actions and policies to be *given* providential exceptionalism, not to assess whether those actions and policies or the reasons for them are good, bad, desirable, unfortunate, sensible or irrational. The idea is to develop a heuristic device, one intended to illuminate, to facilitate our understanding.

In a brilliant essay on the “American Style” in foreign policy decision-making, Stanley {Hoffmann, 1968 #945@362} defended his own heuristic model as “a postulate and a construct. It attempts to establish order in a chaotic mass of features by positing that a nation perceives the world, and its place in it, in a fashion which is never quite that of any other nation....” This type of approach to understanding international policy has much to recommend it: it shows how one might account for distinctive tendencies, characteristic reactions, and recurrent patterns in the actions and attitudes of a particular country without attributing these to the unworkable notion of “character.” It also

indicates that while a model crafted around providential exceptionalism applies uniquely to America, a similar style of analysis might well be applied to other nations (in the spirit of “comparative exceptionalism” mentioned above). Yet as {Hoffmann, 1968 #945@362} cautioned, “this way is a procedure of selection, and therefore inevitably one of exclusion, and it is a procedure of distortion, because things that may be important are left out and also because the things selected are refracted through the prism” of analysis.

We can think of providential exceptionalism operating as a cognitive schema, with its influence notable at two distinct junctures. First, it acts as a sort of cognitive filter, shaping how Americans view international events and the international environment as well as their judgments about them (cf. {Holsti, 1962 #1072}). Americans are quick to evaluate events and trends in terms of morals and virtues, whereas Europeans might be more likely to evaluate them as they would a game of chess, as moves in a great game. The providential underpinnings of politics, to the American mind, make politics inescapably an expression of values and principles. The point is neither to endorse or condemn American practice but rather to suggest that its consistency with a collective belief in one’s country as the vehicle of a providential design, to suggest that we should *expect* such an understanding of politics given providential exceptionalism.

An important qualification must be stated here. A cognitive filter colors the information we receive, shading our perceptions. It thus conditions subjective and inter-subjective judgments about international affairs. This qualification is important for several reasons. First, it shows that my argument involves no claims about the accuracy or self-consciousness of Americans’ perceptions; it brackets epistemological questions

about what constitutes a true understanding of the world. Treating providential exceptionalism as a cognitive *filter* indicates that it sorts and distorts information. Some “real” threats might not register through the filter of providential exceptionalism; some perceived “threats” might be exaggerated or distorted. Second, allowing for the fallibility of public perceptions allows for the possibility of their manipulation {McEvoy-Levy, 2001 #1071}. Providential exceptionalism selects certain events as important or urgent and frames responses to this information in predictable ways; elites can shape their rhetoric and selectively withhold or release information in attempting to manipulate perceptions, thereby capitalizing on strategic opportunities. Manipulation need not be cynical; it can also be used to align values and strategies (see {McEvoy-Levy, 2001 #1071@157}). Finally, emphasizing perceptions reminds us that no two people view the world in the same way; their different cognitive filters mean that, perceptually at least, they live in different worlds.

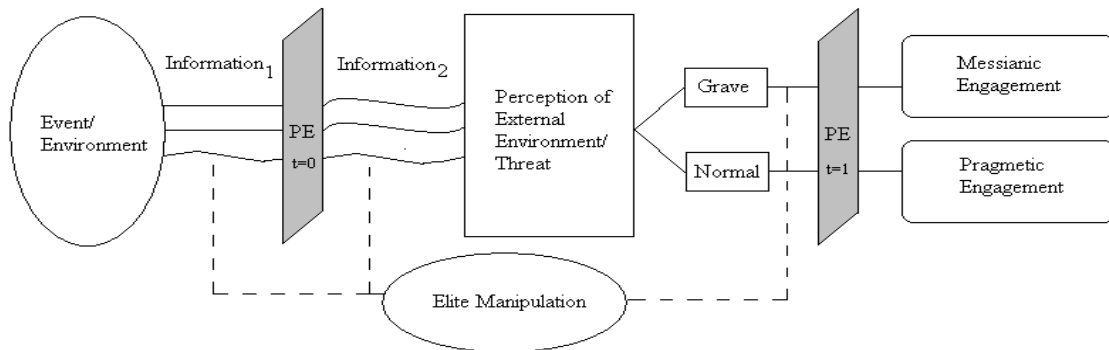
So, providential exceptionalism shapes Americans’ perceptions of the international environment, including, crucially, their assessments of threats facing the United States. These judgments are based on information refracted through their cognitive filter. Once these perceptions crystallize, providential exceptionalism provides a cognitive frame in which responses to these judgments are conceived. At this stage, providential exceptionalism shapes the style and orientation of American international policy and constrains the range of policy options available to decision-makers.<sup>5</sup> Broadly, providential exceptionalism suggests that when the external environment and levels of

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<sup>5</sup> I assume that in a democracy decisions about international policy are broadly constrained (not determined) by public opinion; see {Davis, 1987 #1081}.

threat are perceived to be normal, America will tend toward isolationism; when events or trends pose a grave threat, however, America will adopt a messianic style of engagement.

**Figure 1 – Providential Exceptionalism as Filter and Frame**



In the first phase of the model ( $t=0$ ), providential exceptionalism acts as a cognitive filter. This filter works by selecting threats to liberty and democracy as especially salient. Such threats tend to be equated or conflated with threats to the United States; that is, a threat to liberty and democracy anywhere registers as a threat to America (equation), and any threat to America is perceived as a threat to liberty and democracy generally (conflation).

The reasons for this selection trace to the republican formulation of the errand. providential exceptionalism collapses America’s fate into those of liberty and democracy and constructs the latter as wholly dependent upon the former –Americans as the last, best hope. In addition, providential exceptionalism selects anything that might interrupt or corrupt the errand itself as a particular threat; existential threats – war or imminent attack – of course stand out, but anything that might erode or compromise America’s separateness (on which more below) also registers as highly salient. Other events and trends will appear “normal,” not necessarily insignificant or unimportant, but not urgent or central to the identity or purposes of the United States. In the second phase,

providential exceptionalism works as a cognitive frame, shaping responses to Americans’ perceptions of the external environment and its threats. When those threats are perceived to be grave, in the sense just explicated, providential exceptionalism promotes messianic engagement as an appropriate response; when the international situation appears normal, providential exceptionalism engenders a more pragmatic response.

**Table 1 – Style and Orientation of US International Policy**

	<u>Level of Perceived Threat</u>	
<u>Aspect of US International Policy</u>	<u>Normal</u>	<u>Grave</u>
Style of Engagement	Pragmatic	Messianic
Outlook	Realistic	Redemptive
Objective	Preservation	Transformation
Rhetoric/Tone	Moralistic/ diplomatic	Moralizing/ uncompromising

The “normal” style and orientation of American international policy is essentially pragmatic. This is perfectly consistent with the model of providential exceptionalism. Recall that the belief in America’s distinctive role in the world, in its special errand, is deeply tied up with its geographical and spiritual separation from the rest of the world. It follows that this separation is itself central to the errand, something to be prized and protected. In the era of independence Americans remained convinced that separation was the medium necessary for their culture of liberty and democracy to flourish, a conviction

that, along with the fact of their geographical separation (subsequently diminished by technological developments), formed the country's isolationist instincts.

Providential exceptionalism generates specific expectations about the pragmatic style or orientation of American international policy. A pragmatic outlook will advance conventional American interests while avoiding unnecessary conflicts or entanglements (with their corrupting potential). This pragmatism, which Hoffmann identified as a hallmark of his "American style," extends a typically American can-do attitude (and aversion to complexity) to international affairs. The central objective of American policy in this style is preservation – of American wealth, safety, and crucially, of separation itself. The tone and rhetoric of policy will be moralistic but diplomatic: American leaders and diplomats will speak in the language of providence, liberty, and democracy even as they otherwise adhere to a more traditional diplomatic idiom.

When external threats appear grave – when liberty or democracy seem endangered or when the country seems acutely vulnerable – providential exceptionalism promotes a messianic style of international engagement. In these instances the errand itself seems imperiled, leading, perhaps counter-intuitively, to its internationalization. I refer to the style and orientation of this engagement as "messianic" in light of certain distinctive qualities and characteristics in which it differs dramatically from the isolationist policy just described. When threats are grave, engagement seems unavoidable; preservation of the errand, and by extension of liberty and democracy, become sacred duties. Providential exceptionalism engenders a redemptive outlook for international policy in such instances, with American actions conceived not merely as meeting a threat but rather as cleansing and purifying the world of the evil that gave rise

to it. Messianic engagement therefore promotes transformative objectives; it aims to refashion the world in America's image, implementing the model of democratic liberty it has worked out in its splendid isolation. Transformation and redemption go hand in glove: in recreating the world, America simultaneously ensures its salvation; anything less invites further danger and leaves the errand unfinished. Messianism speaks a moralizing (not just moralistic) language appropriate to these ambitions, adopting an uncompromising tone and offering stark contrasts, black and white against the diplomat's gray on gray. To be against America is to oppose freedom, to stand against a providentially-sanctioned enterprise, a chosen people; America's enemies are evil, proof of which lies in their very status as enemies.

Importantly, messianic engagement does not entail unilateralism. America will typically welcome allies who share (completely and unquestioningly) its understanding of the threat and its uncompromising approach to addressing it. Even where it gathers allies, however, America will typically reserve the right to act unilaterally if allies are unwilling to pursue a particular course it deems necessary and appropriate. While the cooperation of allies might be desirable, it is not an end in itself; when engagement is required, America will go it alone if necessary. It must always use its liberty to do the right thing. In the messianic scheme, alliances say more about the willingness of potential allies to accept American leadership and do the "right thing" than about calculations of efficiency, effectiveness, or diplomacy on America's part.

Again, several qualifications are in order. The model suggests more than that, when faced with grave threats, America will respond aggressively; this would hardly distinguish the United States from any other country. Rather, the crucial point is to show

that the character of this response, its style, outlook, objectives, and rhetoric – are profoundly shaped by providential exceptionalism and can be anticipated through careful analysis of it. Put differently, the point is to say something important and useful about how the United States conceives, constructs, and carries out international policy and to say it in a way that provides analytic leverage. A second, related qualification concerns the complexity of providential exceptionalism. My position must not be confused with more simplistic – if increasingly commonplace – view that American religious beliefs call for a messianic role in the world. The framework developed here attempts to show systematically in what instances and under what conditions providential exceptionalism promotes messianic engagement, and in what instances its latency conduces to a more pragmatic approach. The third qualification is that while military action might often be central to American policy in times of messianic engagement, it need not be so. A messianic diplomacy (perhaps including threats of military action) with characteristics directly analogous to those just described is also plausible. (Conversely, military action might be undertaken for quite limited and pragmatic reasons in periods of “normalcy.”) So the model is not, or not primarily, interested in predicting the use of force; it is interested in the style and orientation of international policy more broadly.

To recapitulate: providential exceptionalism serves as a cognitive schema that shapes and constrains American reactions and responses to the international environment. Normally (as I have defined that term) America will exhibit pragmatic tendencies consistent with its interest in its own providential mission and its related preoccupation with separation. When grave threats arise, providential exceptionalism engenders a messianic response, a style of engagement oriented toward redeeming and transforming

the world. I am not suggesting that providential exceptionalism determines American reactions and responses; it strongly conditions them, but other factors are also important. Nor am I suggesting that these reactions and responses are deliberate; they resemble reflexes, an almost automatic responses to external stimuli patterned by deeply ingrained predispositions. This model of providential exceptionalism as a cognitive schema possesses several advantages over other depictions of the American character, identity, or style; principally, its dynamism. Most similar claims are static, positing that Americans believe X and so do Y. Providential exceptionalism itself is a postulate, but the model allows for variation on the independent variables to explain variation in the dependent variables at two stages. This sophistication makes the model more sensitive to nuance and hopefully, therefore, more useful in making sense of continuity and change in American policy and attitudes toward human rights.

### **Providential Exceptionalism and the Cold War**

A recounting of American history through the lens of providential exceptionalism is both beyond this essay's scope and unnecessary to its argument. In this section I shall simply point out the consistency between the expectations developed above for the messianic style of engagement and the style and orientation of American policy during the Cold War. Doing so has two advantages beyond establishing the plausibility of the model. First, it helps us to understand why so many commentators have (mis)taken messianic engagement as a fixed feature of the American attitudes and behavior; second, it helps us to understand how the end of the Cold War was perceived by American policy-makers, intellectuals, and the American public. In the next section I shall use this understanding

to show how America's shift back to a pragmatic orientation had a significant enabling effect on the development of the international human rights regime throughout the Long 1990s.

The optimism surrounding the hopes for an Allied-led unity of nations following victory over the Axis powers began to fade even before that victory was achieved. By the late 1940s the Soviet Union had been identified as a new and powerful threat to American ideals, security, and interests. The particulars of this structural conflict and its geopolitical and ideological implications are familiar and need not be elaborated here. I want to focus briefly, however, on the style, outlook, objectives, and rhetoric and tone of American international policy during this period, in an effort to demonstrate the influence of providential exceptionalism.

The Cold War struggle was typically depicted in world-historical, even apocalyptic, terms. The doctrine of containment remade the prophylactic impulse of American isolationism as an aggressive policy of international engagement in the messianic style. American international policy had a clear redemptive orientation: to purge the evil of "Godless communism" from the world and to correct its fallacious notions of human freedom. (Framing the Vietnam conflict as an anticommunist crusade made it "unlosable" for President Johnson; {Hook, 2000 #934@131-2}). America sought not co-existence but rather the defeat of a global superpower, the liberation of Eastern Europe and other strongholds of Communism, and the spread of liberal democracy, American style, throughout the world. The soaring rhetoric and uncompromising tone of the Kennedy and Reagan Administrations are the best examples of this: when Kennedy set out to "let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any

price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and success of liberty”; when Reagan famously called the Soviet Union an “evil empire,” and denounced a “deadening accommodation with totalitarian evil,” they proved worthy exemplars of rhetorical style and policy prescriptions of providential exceptionalism.

As {Lipset, 1996 #930@20} has argued, “Americans must define their role in a conflict as being on God’s side against Satan – for morality, against evil.” Such uncompromising moralism dominates messianic engagement, linking the use of force with the country’s principles in the national psyche {Hook, 2000 #934@18}. “If circumstances oblige [the US] to cooperate with evil regimes, they are converted into agents of virtue”; Churchill welcomed Stalin as an ally even while denouncing his brutality, while America created the mythical image of the benign, pipe-smoking “Uncle Joe” for popular consumption {Lipset, 1996 #930@66}. Throughout the Cold War, America repeatedly allied with unsavory regimes, “friendly tyrants” whose opposition to the greater evil of Communism led the United States not only to overlook but to condone, cooperate with, and whitewash their authoritarianism, their use of torture, and their abuse of human rights {Pipes, 1991 #1075}.

While providential exceptionalism has no definitive expectations with respect to the strategic and tactical orientation of international policy, it is consistent with what former Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot described as a policy of “strategic multilateralism and tactical unilateralism” during the Cold War (cited in {Koh, 2003 #938@1499}). This accommodation was facilitated by a broad agreement among America and its allies on the terms, scope, and importance of the conflict. This is not to

say that the allies never chafed at American rhetoric or actions, from the evil empire speech and the deployment of missiles in Western Europe to US support for friendly tyrants. The point to emphasize is that America was willing to pursue a multilateral strategy and use multilateral tactics when its allies were on the same page, but it never hesitated to act unilaterally when it felt justified in doing so. NATO's multilateralism was maintained as much by the flexibility it afforded America to adopt unilateral tactics as by agreement on the strategy itself.

American policy and attitudes certainly varied throughout the Cold War; the Cuban Missile Crisis and détente illustrate the extremes nicely. My point is not that providential exceptionalism somehow explains every policy decision, military deployment, covert deployment, and diplomatic gesture. It is rather that providential exceptionalism shaped, in a profound way, both how the broader conflict was interpreted and how America reacted to it. It would be a fair criticism to point out that in characterizing the style, orientation, outlook, and rhetoric of American policy providential exceptionalism does not explain but merely characterizes them. But it is an equally fair rejoinder that characterization can contribute to our understanding, especially when what we are trying to understand is a profound shift on precisely those dimensions that providential exceptionalism characterizes. To see this, we have to consider the end of the Cold War in light of the providential framing of it.

### **The Long 1990s (I): The End of History?**

The euphoria that accompanied the fall of the Berlin Wall on 11/9 must be understood in light of the providential framing of 40-year struggle that preceded it. Francis

{Fukuyama, 1992 #453} famously influential interpretation of the end of the Cold War as the “end of history” only makes sense in light of the providential understanding of the conflict itself. However naïve or simplistic critics might find his broader argument, Fukuyama’s premise, his framing of these events in eschatological terms, made perfect sense from the perspective of providential exceptionalism. Since the Cold War had been framed as a world-historical battle of liberty and democracy against totalitarianism, the victory over Communism seemed to fulfill the redemptive and transformative ambitions of American policy. The triumphalism accompanying this victory attributed it not to superior Western military capabilities and economic productivity directly but rather to the superior virtue and strength of purpose and leadership owing to the rightness of the Western cause – as the recent apotheoses of President Reagan and Pope John Paul II clearly illustrate. Indeed, given that the Cold War had been constructed as a conflict of good and evil, one whose ultimate resolution would determine the fate of freedom in the world, it could hardly have been otherwise.

So the victory heralded redemption and transformation. In this case Fukuyama anticipated that the enemy’s defeat would usher in the spread of liberalism and democracy around the world, what President G.H.W. Bush called, in distinctively providential jargon, “a new world order.” In 1991, after successfully assembling a global coalition to reverse the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the President described to Congress the

prospect of a new world order. In the words of Winston Churchill, a ‘world order’ in which ‘the principles of justice and fair play ... protect the weak against the strong ....’ A world where the United Nations, freed from cold war stalemate, is poised to fulfill the historic vision of its founders. A world in which freedom and respect for human rights find a home among all nations.

Again, the idea is not to validate President Bush's interpretation of events but rather to show that, in providentialist terms, the end of the Cold War seemed to indicate – had to indicate, given its totality – the long-awaited advent of freedom, democracy, and human rights that the prophecies had for so long foretold.

Providential exceptionalism is thus instrumental in helping us to make sense of the way that Americans understood the end of the Cold War. First, the threat to American ideals and survival had been eradicated, and with it the chief obstacle to a world recreated, finally, in America's image – one of liberal democracy, laissez-faire capitalism, and mutually-self-interested cooperation. This is in essence what the end of history foretold, the fulfillment of a Hegelian historical drama with America (and American values) as the protagonists. At the same time the messianic logic of providential exceptionalism reached its zenith, however, the very absence of a new existential threat tipped American's back into the more pragmatic orientation toward international affairs that had been latent since the outbreak of the Second World War. Put differently, once the end of history arrives, pragmatism becomes the sensible path; once the big questions are settled – freedom, democracy, human rights – the rest is administration.

This point can easily be pushed too far. I only want to underscore that the end of the Cold War served as a stark reminder that messianic engagement is one orientation, not the only orientation, in American international policy. It is of course not the case that American exemptionalism, double-standards, and legal isolationism – to focus on those areas most closely connected with the international human rights regime – suddenly ceased. Yet it is equally true that all of them lessened considerable. The United States

ratified four crucial human rights treaties during this period – the Conventions on Torture, Genocide, the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and the ICCPR. It was instrumental in the creation of the international criminal tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda. It participated in multilateral humanitarian interventions around the world (Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo). It improved its record with respect to support of authoritarian regimes, and it became more consistent and more compliant with international norms, laws, and expectations in the area of human rights. The rehabilitation was far from complete, and recalcitrance remained evident in the failure to ratify other conventions, to completely sever ties with rights-abuse regimes, and to fully subordinate the country to international law. Still, the change was notable and significant.

Perhaps even more important than the change in US policy and attitudes was the development that this change enabled in the international human rights regime. The period following 1989 saw remarkable broadening and deepening of the regime, as the number of democratic states grew rapidly, the universality of human rights was affirmed at the 1993 Vienna Conference, transnational civil society developed and matured, and – most significantly – human rights became the unchallenged standard of global political legitimacy and the unparalleled normative discourse of global politics. In all of these respects the long 1990s were a golden age for human rights. That is not to say that everything changed. Despite these developments, scholars have found little solid empirical evidence of a marked improvement in human rights practices around the world.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the unleashing of global capitalism, signaled by the creation of the

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<sup>6</sup> Cites needed -- Cingranelli and Richards, others. Whether this lack of evidence is an artifact of the empirical methods employed or evidence against my hypothesis is hard to say. For example, few of these

WTO in 1994/5, has been associated by many critics with serious denigration of human rights across the developing (and even in the developed) world (though again the empirical evidence is mixed).<sup>7</sup>

How much of a role American acquiescence played in the strengthening of the normative core of the regime is difficult to assess. Yet it should be emphasized that the United States was not merely a passive bystander in these developments; it often (though not always) played an active and constructive role in promoting the development of human rights norms globally. There is undoubtedly much for critics to criticize in American performance on human rights throughout the long 1990s. Yet at bottom the American view that the triumph over Communism both reflected and affirmed the strength of its values certainly enabled the regime's development. Again, most crucially, the dominance of human rights as standards of political legitimacy and anchors of normative discourse in global politics marked a significant advance.

### **The United States' Paradoxical Leadership on International Human Rights**

Before considering the systemic factors that conditioned the changes in American policy and attitudes just described, a digression seems in order. One of the central puzzles regarding American international policy concerns the paradoxical role of American leadership on international human rights. The United States has been a leader in creating and supporting organizations like the UN and has provided a strong voice – and strong hand – in support of human rights around the world, yet it often exempts itself from stipulations of treaties that it does not like, fails to comply with its treaty and other

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studies pay attention to those rights – political expression, participation in government – that the trend toward democratization seems to entail.

<sup>7</sup> CITES

obligations, and refuses to sign or ratify treaties it has negotiated (*exemptionalism*; {Ignatieff, forthcoming #936@4} FIX In addition, the US frequently applies *double standards*, judging other countries by high standards while excusing or denying violations by itself and its allies {Mertus, 2004 #1080}. Finally, the American legal system resists international human rights jurisprudence and is reluctant to incorporate human rights provisions into US law (*legal isolationism*; {Ignatieff, forthcoming #936@5}FIX;{Ignatieff, 2002 #953}; {Koh, 2003 #938}).

In this section I apply the outlook and framework of providential exceptionalism to these paradoxes. In doing so I take no position on the uniqueness of the American behavior in question (double standards, hypocrisy, and reservations to treaties, for instance, are common if unfortunate features of the human rights world). I intend rather to address the reasons animating American behavior, to understand it, from the perspective afforded by providential exceptionalism. I shall approach the paradox in two ways; first, by recounting certain aspects of providential exceptionalism that shed light on exemptionalism and legal isolationism, and second, by showing how the model and policy expectations developed above deepen our understanding of the paradoxical leadership patterns just described. I do not purport to resolve the paradox but rather to show that it appears both less surprising and less puzzling in light of providential exceptionalism.

Three aspects of the belief in America's providential errand bear directly on this puzzle: its foundations in separateness, the federal idea of liberty, and the notion of America as a city on a hill, an exemplar for the world. Separateness has received extensive discussion already and I shall not rehearse those arguments again. Recall

simply that separateness facilitates development of the purified institutions through which rehabilitation of a corrupt world is to take place; it is a necessary but not sufficient condition of creating moral institutions (which can be subverted by failure of purpose or understanding). The federal conception of liberty, in which freedom is used to do the right thing, to secure salvation, makes popular sovereignty a mechanism for affirming God's purposes by submitting to them. Finally, the city on a hill is an exemplar of virtue – ideally, of virtue realized, but potentially of virtue betrayed as well. Like the scripture from which it borrows, this view commends leadership by example; it is in this sense that America's errand implies a right and an obligation to lead (cf. {McEvoy-Levy, 2001 #1071@5ff}).

These features of providential exceptionalism helpfully illuminate American practices of exemptionalism and legal isolationism. The latter is directly implied by separateness; submission to outside laws, norms, or institutions limits full devotion to the divine ends America strives to realize. Because the outside world is imagined as venal, corrupt, and of doubtful moral purpose, moreover, submission might interfere with providential ends or taint American institutions. A similar logic applies to exemptionalism; it is less that Americans disagree with the substance of the rights they refuse to enact or ratify than that they doubt both the necessity and the wisdom of binding themselves through international mechanisms, especially because of their faith that they are more likely than others to get matters right to begin with. From this perspective, the paradox of American refusal to ratify and implement international human rights agreements and its record of strong and vigorous domestic compliance and enforcement makes sense (cf. {Ignatieff, forthcoming #936}FIX).

Much of America's seemingly paradoxical behavior is, if not explained, at least rendered less puzzling by showing its consistency with the particular (though peculiar) cognitive schema of providential exceptionalism. By applying the model based on this schema and the policy expectations it generates, we can add depth and complexity to this understanding. Consider first periods of messianic engagement. We have already seen how providential exceptionalism leads to the whitewashing of authoritarian allies with sometimes appalling human rights records in the name of a broader redemptive and transformative struggle often justified as a defense of human rights. This double standard becomes all the more galling in light of the moralizing and uncompromising rhetoric typical of messianic engagement, rhetoric in light of which the hypocrisy of American double standards seems especially egregious. In addition, the transformative objectives articulated during periods of messianic engagement might often include new or expanded commitments to democracy and human rights in some form, as after both world wars and the collapse of Communism.

Crucially, providential exceptionalism expects change in both of these areas when threats recede. First, with respect to double standards, we would anticipate that in periods of isolation the United States would have less need of unsavory allies. It is perhaps telling in this connection that President Carter, who touted human rights as the centerpiece of his foreign policy, was unable to do much to link American aid to human rights performance {Stohl, 1984 #1076}; after 1989, both President G.H.W. Bush and President Clinton had much better success in making American assistance conditional upon human rights performance. Similarly, we have seen how after two of the three major threats of this century were overcome, America's transformative ambitions quickly

faded as the country turned inward; only after World War II was the internationalist agenda articulated during the period of grave threat implemented – because, I have suggested, the next dire threat followed so immediately. providential exceptionalism anticipates American leadership in negotiating and promoting human rights institutions during messianic periods with quick retreat and withdrawal during the following intervals of isolation. In such times the country prefers leadership by example; America’s commitment to liberty, to its errand at home, obviates the need for binding commitments. Thus providential exceptionalism not only anticipates compliance without ratification but also involvement (during periods of engagement) without ratification (in periods of isolation; cf. {Ignatieff, forthcoming #936}FIX.

The account presented here improves on traditional exceptionalist treatments of America’s leadership role because it allows for changes of policy and of behavior in changing circumstances. Static arguments about hypocrisy, or arguments ascribing America’s human rights role to its fascination with popular sovereignty or to some unspecified liberal consensus miss the episodic character of American leadership. Moreover, providential exceptionalism allows us to connect our understanding of America’s human rights leadership role with a broader understanding of international policy. Again, let me stress that this account in no way condones or approves the American role; its behavior, regardless of whether it is unique, is frequently condescending; in particular, the hypocrisy and double standards of American policy can undermine both American leadership and, much more importantly, respect for and promotion of human rights. Demonstrating the consistency and continuity of American international policy helps us better to understand that policy.

## **The Long 1990s (II): All Good Things Come to an End**

It is worth considering the structural factors that account for the shift from messianic to pragmatic engagement following the end of the Cold War. [Cite Dietrich here] First, the absence of an enemy ushered in an era of American hegemony that made it easy to achieve greater consistency between values and practices. Second, the rapid development of global capitalism, driven by American corporate and financial power, augmented this traditional military hegemony and gave the United States almost unprecedented leverage globally. Finally, the ideological triumph secured with the collapse of Soviet Communism cemented the power and appeal of American values.

With the terrorist attacks of 9/11, each of these factors was reversed or set back. First, while American hegemony remained unquestioned after the attacks, the reality of asymmetrical challenges to power became painfully evident. It quickly became clear that hegemony was not equivalent with security. Second, the globalization of capital and markets, while certainly augmenting American hard and soft power in many respects, also made it easier for states to avoid dependence on American trade and largess. Perhaps even more troubling, the Kantian ideal of a “commercial peace” – the hope that trade among states would lead to a reduction of conflict and a harmonization of interests around universal liberal values – was exploded in a symbolic cloud of toxic dust at ground zero. Finally, the idea that American values had become universal with the defeat of the Communism was cruelly exposed as wishful thinking.

Not surprisingly, Americans – both political leaders and the general public – quickly reverted to a Cold War framework for making sense of this sudden turn of events and for considering apt responses. When viewed through the lens of the providential

framework developed here, we can see that recent policy marks not an unprecedented departure from past American policy or a seamless continuation of a policy marked by messianism and the distortions it necessarily entails but instead a return to familiar and predictable patterns of behavior. I shall first show this with respect to the drift of American policy generally, then with particular attention to human rights policy.

The attacks of 11 September 2001 certainly signaled, if belatedly, the advent of a new and significant external threat to the United States. The sudden and psychologically devastating realization of this threat was seared forever on the minds of millions as the World Trade Towers collapsed and the Pentagon smoldered. The country reacted precisely as providential exceptionalism would anticipate, launching into a cycle of messianic engagement. The moralizing and uncompromising rhetoric that followed the attacks – of a War on Terror, one in which every country is “for us or against us,” and so on – perfectly fit the style providential exceptionalism associates with messianic engagement. Indeed, President Bush’s much derided “crusade” comment, though lamentable for its syntax, is perhaps most remarkable from the perspective developed here for its perfect consistency with and expression of a providentialist interpretation of the events of 9/11.

This war on terror clearly has a redemptive dimension, one revealed in another much-discussed comment that followed the attacks. Speaking on television just days after the terrorists struck, the Reverend Jerry Falwell (cited in {Harris, 2001 #1084}) stated that

[the ACLU has] got to take a lot of blame for [the September 11 attacks].... The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and

the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way – all of them who have tried to secularize America – I point the finger in their face and say, “You helped this happen”.

Falwell’s remarks have been dismissed as extreme, well out of step with the mainstream. The marginality of his political views notwithstanding, Falwell’s account of the meaning of 9/11 follows a long tradition of interpreting the success of enemies as divine punishment and correction, a tradition that traces through Lincoln and the abolitionists back to Mary Rowlandson. God had “lifted the curtain,” in Falwell’s words, allowing the terrorists to strike hard at the United States. In the War on Terror America must redeem both itself and the world, a potentially revelatory insight in the context of the “moral values” upheavals roiling American politics today.

The War on Terror also has a transformative objective: to rid the world of “evildoers.” The practical implications are plain enough: the goal of American policy is to destroy terrorist networks and, if necessary, the nations that harbor them. It is enlightening to keep this objective in mind as we consider the quick erosion of the global solidarity felt with the United States in the hours and days following the attacks. While Europeans shared Americans’ horror – as well as, perhaps, some of their fears about radical Islam – they could not identify with the policies undertaken in pursuit of this far-reaching objective. As critics noted, Europeans have extensive and sobering experience with terrorism, experience that colors their perceptions regarding the origins and nature of the threat and of appropriate responses to it. Just as significantly, Europeans were generally not persuaded, as most Americans were, by the administration’s efforts to link Iraq with Al Qaeda and the wider war on terrorism. Much of America’s unilateralism since 9/11 reflects this gulf in perceptions; like the ends of World War I and the Gulf

War, and unlike the end of World War II, America could not enlist many allies in “doing the right thing.” The Cold War alignment of strategic multilateralism and tactical unilateralism has been reversed; America is going it alone, though on particular issues – Iran, North Korea – it has shown a willingness (at least when other options fail) to work with allies where common ground exists.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Elite manipulation worked exactly as the model anticipates in the run up to war in Iraq; the best analog is the run-up to the Spanish-American War; see {Lott, 2004 #1086}.

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With respect to human rights, the reversion to Cold War form is eerily complete. The United States has exempted itself from the Geneva Conventions and the Convention on Torture, and has done so at the highest levels, as a matter of policy. It has once again adopted gross double standards, allying with such human rights-abusive regimes as Pakistan and Uzbekistan and condoning Chinese and Russian aggression against nationalist minority groups while decrying the human right abuses of its newfound foes. Moreover, the War on Terror – with its efforts to rid the world of evildoers and to put freedom on the march using such tactics as indefinite detention without charges,

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<u>Aspect of US International Policy</u>	<u>Level of Perceived Threat</u>	
	<u>Normal</u>	<u>Grave</u>
Style of Engagement	Isolationist	Messianic
Outlook	Pragmatic	Redemptive
Objective	Preservation	Transformation
Rhetoric/Tone	Traditional/moralistic	Moralizing/uncompromising
Strategic disposition	Unilateralism	* indeterminate
Tactical disposition	Unilateralism	* indeterminate

rendition, and torture – has given renewed vigor and conclusive evidence to those who charge the United States with hypocrisy. If history repeats itself as tragedy, the tragedy of American human rights policy since 9/11 was written during the Cold War. In almost all respects, in style and in substance, the United States has reverted to its Cold War form.

### **9/11 and the Future of the Human Rights Regime**

Much of the rhetoric surrounding the erosion of the international human rights regime since 9/11 is overblown. As Jack Donnelly's paper for this conference shows pretty persuasively, there has been relatively little radical change in respect for human rights around the world in recent years outside the high-profile areas of torture and illegal detention. In addition, while the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have rightly been condemned for their poor execution and – especially in the case of Iraq – poor conception, the regime changes in those countries have certainly inaugurated positive developments in the area of human rights. This is not to justify or condone either war; it is merely to point out that neither one, or the detestable policies on interrogation and detention that have arisen in their wake, has significantly damaged the international human rights regime.

Yet it seems to me that the end of the long 1990s does pose a significant threat to that regime, one that can only be fully comprehended in light of the understanding of that period that providential exceptionalism affords. I have argued that the most important development relating to the international human rights regime during the long 1990s was the emergence of human rights as the unchallenged normative doctrine of global politics.

The advent of the security paradigm and the War on Terror threaten this development by establishing a rival normative standard and framework for the assessment of international policy. To the extent that the security paradigm, as implemented through the War on Terror, gains credence as an alternative to human rights – for example, by providing justifications for ignoring prohibitions on torture, on limitless detention, on domestic surveillance, and so forth – it can only erode human rights as a normative standard. It was stunning to see the rapidity with which governments around the world adopted the language of terrorism and security in justifying ongoing practices of repression against ethnic and political minorities. Equally stunning was the American repetition of Cold War policy errors – the fascination with Musharraf being perhaps the quintessential example – regarding support of authoritarian regimes with deplorable human rights records even in the midst of a conflict that the United States itself was framing as a struggle over values like freedom, democracy, and human rights.

Yet we miss something important about American policy and attitudes towards human rights and about the nature and extent of the threat to the international human rights regime if we construe these developments as merely a continuation of a policy that has gone unchanged since the end of the World War II. The lesson of the long 1990s is that American engagement in the world, including on the issue of human rights, is susceptible of considerable and important variation. Recent developments thus remind us not only that the possibility of a different American outlook and orientation is conceivable but also that the present reversion to form poses real and clearly identifiable threats to the progress made throughout the long 1990s. In particular, my analysis highlights the threat that the War on Terror represents as a scheme of legitimation for

policies that undermine the normative core of the human rights regime and fly in the face of the standards of legitimacy that that regime has promoted. This is not to say that the regime has – thus far – suffered serious degeneration. It is rather to highlight the potential for such degeneration, hopefully in a way that is conducive to its avoidance.

There is a worrisome tendency to imagine that with the end of the G.W. Bush administration things will get “back to normal.” The history of providential exceptionalism suggests that such hopes are misguided. There is a deep-rooted American tendency to conceive significant threats in existential terms and to revert to well-established patterns of messianic engagement in addressing them. Critics have argued – I think sensibly – that the loss of 3,000 lives, while tragic for those immediately affected and traumatic for the nation that watched the horror unfold live on television, hardly represents an existential threat to our security, our values, or our way of life. Yet to voice such sentiments is politically almost impossible. So countless billions of dollars and thousands of lives have been squandered, in a sense – to make 9/11 fit the providential framework. To expect these deeply-engrained cultural reflexes to change merely with the election of a new president is foolish and dangerous.

We would do much better to learn from the example of the 1990s and to emphasize three crucial differences between the pre-11/9 and post 9/11 worlds. First, while the attacks on New York and Washington (and subsequent events in Madrid and London) have reminded us of the vulnerability of even hegemonic powers to asymmetrical attacks, there is no sense in which America or its allies face an existential threat from terrorism. The exaggeration of this threat makes it easy to ignore cooperative, multi-lateral, and pragmatic strategies that would be much more effective in

addressing the real threats we do face while simultaneously reinforcing the values of the human rights regime. Second, perhaps even more than during the Cold War, consistency between our values and our actions is one of our primary resources in wining the struggle to contain terrorism. Finally, and again arguable unlike the Cold War, security and protection and promotion of human rights are – as growing numbers of commentators realize – two sides of the same coin. The challenges we face cannot be overcome through force. While it is not true that terrorists are mainly poor or disaffected individuals, it is true that those whose complicity or acquiescence enables terrorists to operate and recruit effectively can be challenged effectively through greater protection for human rights.