

A Post-American World?

Assessing the Cognitive and Attitudinal Impacts of Challenges to American
Exceptionalism

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Abstract

A number of voices have emerged in U.S. political discourse questioning the legitimacy of American exceptionalism, suggesting we are in a “post-American world.” Our research examines the effects that political messages that explicitly challenge American exceptionalism can have on U.S. public opinion. Drawing upon social identity theory, we find that explicit challenges to American exceptionalism significantly impact Americans’ views toward their own nation, their willingness to denigrate foreign publics, and their broader foreign policy preferences.

Keywords: *American Exceptionalism, Political Discourse, National Identity, Media Effects, Patriotism*

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Assessing the Cognitive and Attitudinal Impacts of Challenges to American Exceptionalism

The idea of American exceptionalism has been deeply embedded within the American psyche since well before the United States even became a country (Lockhart, 2003; Madsen, 1998). For years, citizens, journalists, and politicians alike have continued to reify this notion within the American public sphere, so much so, that it has become a mainstay of in the American body politic (Edwards, 2008; Edwards & Weiss, 2011; Gilmore, Sheets, & Rowling, 2016). That said, many have recently suggested that the United States might no longer be the exceptional world power that it once was. Take for example, Donald Trump, who in his 2016 campaign speeches frequently said that America doesn't win anymore. More recently, as president, Trump was criticized for taking another jab at American exceptionalism when he equated the United States as a moral equivalent to Vladimir Putin's oppressive regime in Russia saying, "[y]ou think our country's so innocent?" during a nationally televised interview (Mele, 2017). Indeed, such challenges within American political discourse have become increasingly common in recent years.

Perhaps one of the more prominent examples can be found in the *New York Times* bestselling book, "The Post American World," in which author, Fareed Zakaria (2011), argued that the United States is gradually losing its dominance in world affairs due to what he deems "the rise of the rest." China, for example, has been seen as a viable threat to American hegemony (Layne, 2008), and countries such as Russia and Iran have

aggressively sought to challenge U.S. influence around the world (Mason, 2009). The increasing presence of these types of messages have forced many Americans to reconcile their belief in American exceptionalism with the reality that the United States might be losing its influence and power in the world.

Extant scholarship has examined the distinct ways in which the idea of American exceptionalism has been invoked in American political discourse, treated within the U.S. news media, and received among the broader American citizenry (Edwards, 2008; Edwards & Weiss, 2011; Gilmore, 2014; Neumann & Coe, 2011; Ivie & Giner 2009; Restad, 2014; Pease, 2009). Only recently have scholars begun to explore the impacts that explicit challenges to American exceptionalism might have on how Americans view their nation, perceive other countries, and think about how the United States should engage the global community. Specifically, Gilmore and Rowling (2017) found that challenges by foreign leaders to America's image and its standing in the world tends to provoke harsh ethnocentric attitudes among U.S. citizens. Minimal research, however, has sought to test the impacts of these challenges when they originate from sources within the United States.

Such work is important for several reasons. First, challenges to American exceptionalism—from scholars to journalists to political officials—have been on the rise as of late within the United States. Second, officials from both major political parties have engaged in these types of challenges. Third, given that this belief is at the core of how many Americans view their country, it is imperative that we explore how such challenges might impact Americans' views toward their own nation, their willingness to

denigrate other countries, and their broader preferences regarding how the United State should approach international relations.

With this in mind, we conducted a message experiment in which respondents were exposed to messages that either reified or called into question the notion of American exceptionalism. Specifically, drawing upon scholarship on social identity theory, we explore the psychological dynamics of how Americans might respond to statements pertaining to the status of American exceptionalism. Our findings suggest that challenges to this idea significantly impact: (a) Americans' own sense of American exceptionalism; (b) Americans' willingness to actively degrade others countries; and (c) Americans' acceptance of specific American exceptionalism-related foreign policy orientations. We reflect on the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Social Identity Theory and Challenges to American Exceptionalism

Over the past four decades, scholars from a number of disciplines have been fascinated with the concept of American exceptionalism (Edwards & Weiss, 2012; Lipset, 1996; Madsen, 1998; Restad, 2017). There are a number of different approaches to examining American exceptionalism. Traditionally, scholars have sought to examine the United States to identify whether or not it has some special characteristics that have made it verifiably "exceptional" or not (See Lipset, 1996). Our approach examines American exceptionalism not as a verifiable fact, but as part of the national mythos of America, an idea that is pervasive in both public discourse and in the minds of citizens. For most Americans who believe in American exceptionalism, it does not matter whether data can

“prove” this idea to be true or not, their belief in it persists regardless. From this perspective then, American exceptionalism is the pervasively held belief that the United States has a unique place within the international community (Restad, 2014; Gilmore, 2015). Embedded in this idea are the notions that the United States is a singular country, one that is superior, and perhaps even favored by God among the countries of the world. It is an idea that is older than the country itself and one that has been actively perpetuated by politicians and citizens alike (Madsen, 1998).

Research in social psychology—specifically, social identity theory—provides a framework for understanding the relative power and cultural resonance of the idea of American exceptionalism in American politics and within the broader national identity. According to several scholars (Anderson, 1983; Huddy and Khatib, 2007), firm belief in the greatness of one’s nation is something that many citizens tend to hold dear and safeguard actively (Bar-Tal, 2005; Billig, 1995; Bloom, 1990; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Social identity theory suggests that this happens because people tend to link their own individual identity and self-esteem to their groups (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For this reason, people directly tie the image of their social group—in this case, the nation—to their own self-image. Furthermore, because the two identities can be inexorably intertwined, people tend to seek ways to think of their own country in positive ways so that the positive image reflects back on them as individuals. In other words, when the United States is seen as exceptional, Americans will also tend to feel exceptional by association.

Because many citizens tend to derive such a strong sense of emotional legitimacy from their national identity (Anderson, 1983), it is also common for them to actively seek out ways to protect and bolster the image of that national group through active social comparisons with other countries and national groups (Tajfel, 1981; Triandis, 1994). As Triandis (1994) has argued, it is “natural to help or cooperate with members of our in-group, to favor our in-group, to feel proud of our in-group, and to be distrustful of and even hostile towards out-groups” (pp. 251-252). In effect, such a cognitive response occurs in order to establish the nation in a pre-eminent position relative to others and, in doing so, bolster the national identity. Bandura (1990) refers to this as engaging in advantageous comparisons whereby people seek to elevate their own nation’s image over that of all other nations. American exceptionalism is perhaps the ultimate form of advantageous comparison because it does not just involve favoring the United States, it hierarchically positions the United States above all other countries. This hierarchical positioning, however, can elicit a range of psychological responses, beyond merely pride in one’s own nation. Tajfel (1981) argues, for example, that citizens who find their country atop the hierarchical ladder tend to feel a heightened sense of insecurity about their country’s image because their “superior” status is constantly being challenged by competitors. In particular, Tajfel contends that this leads people within that “superior” group to feel that they have to constantly safeguard and preserve their national group’s exceptional image. This dynamic can be augmented when people perceive their national group, the nation’s image, or in this case it’s exceptional status to be threatened in some way (Gilmore & Rowling, 2017; Wohl and Branscombe, 2008).

Messages that either champion or challenge American exceptionalism, therefore, are likely to impact people in very distinct ways. Previous studies have shown that messages that actively champion or challenge American exceptionalism can activate a number of cognitive reactions. Consistent with social identity theory, we are specifically interested in the differential impacts of these messages on an in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) or ethnocentric (Kinder & Kam, 2009) bias referred to as the “national exceptionalism bias” (Gilmore, 2015). The national exceptionalism bias has two important psychological components. The first is an *exceptionalism worldview*, which involves the explicit belief that the United States is a singular nation, one that has a unique and perhaps superior role to play in the international community. The second component involves an outright *degradation of other countries* in comparison to the United States. This position includes the explicit categorization of other countries as being inferior to, or less unique than, the United States. Although this position is somewhat implicit within an exceptionalism worldview, research has shown it to be psychologically distinct. For example, it is quite one thing to say that one’s own country is the greatest country on earth, but it is quite another to explicitly express that other countries are inferior by comparison. Taken together, these two components encapsulate the overall in-group bias embedded in a belief in American exceptionalism.

We posit that both psychological components of the national exceptionalism bias are likely to be impacted differently by messages that champion American exceptionalism versus those that challenge it. In the case of the *exceptionalism worldview* we expect the messages to have opposite effects. On the one hand, those who are exposed

to messages that champion American exceptionalism are likely to embrace the message. Specifically, because the message itself reinforces the very idea of American exceptionalism people are likely to have a heightened sense of the same. In other words, the cognitive pathway to people's ability to champion the idea is laid by the message itself, and previous research has shown these messages to have this direct impact (Gilmore, 2015; Gilmore & Rowling, 2017). On the other hand, messages that explicitly challenge the idea of American exceptionalism should spur citizens to be more likely to resist or doubt the idea. As several studies have shown, messages that directly challenge deeply held ideas and beliefs tend to induce individuals to entertain and cognitively process the challenges and, in doing so, doubt their ideas and beliefs (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Sniderman and Theriault, 2004). This is not to say that this will lead Americans to have negative feelings about American exceptionalism, but rather that the cognitive pathway to their own willingness to champion the idea will be muddied by the message itself. In light of these perspectives, we offer our first expectation:

H1: Messages challenging American exceptionalism will spur weaker American exceptionalism worldviews in respondents than will messages that champion American exceptionalism.

The second component of the national exceptionalism bias, *degradation of other countries*, is also likely to be differentially affected by these messages. Previous research has shown that messages that champion and challenge American exceptionalism can impact citizens' willingness to degrade other countries. Specifically, Gilmore (2015) found that messages that highlight the most explicit forms of American exceptionalism

(singular, superior, God-favored) are more likely to spur citizens to also degrade other countries. This happens because the idea that the United States is the world's exceptional country carries the implicit notion that other countries are inferior in that comparison and one notion tends to spur the other related notion. That said, we expect messages that challenge American exceptionalism directly to have an even deeper impact on this component of the cognitive bias. We expect this because messages that challenge such a deeply held belief are likely to create a sense of cognitive dissonance in citizens, resulting from their own willingness—as discussed above—to follow suit and challenge or doubt American exceptionalism. Research has shown that when citizens are tasked with negatively evaluating their own nation they tend to find alternative ways to restore the image of that nation, including negatively targeting other countries (Bandura, 1990; Gilmore, Meeks, & Domke, 2013; Rothgerber, 1997). It is easier to accept that one's own nation is flawed, when others seem more flawed by comparison (Bandura, 1990). In essence, actively degrading other countries helps to repair some of the damage done through their own critical assessment of American exceptionalism. With this in mind, we offer our next hypothesis:

H2: Messages challenging American exceptionalism will spur a stronger sense of national exceptionalism via the degradation of others than will messages that champion American exceptionalism.

Challenges to American Exceptionalism and Foreign Policy Attitudes

We are also interested in measuring the impacts of messages championing or challenging American exceptionalism on specific foreign policy preferences. For those

who believe that the United States is a singular, superior, and even God-favored global power, it is common for them to also believe that the country has special roles to play in the global community (Lipset, 1996; McCrisken, 2003; Restad, 2014, 2017; Saito, 2010). According to Restad (2014), the belief in American exceptionalism is directly related to two central foreign policy preferences embedded in what she refers to as *unilateral internationalism*. The first part of this foreign policy orientation has to do with a preference for unilateral action on the global stage. It assumes that the United States is special in that it does not have to play by the same rules as the rest of the international community, which is derived from the idea that because the United States is charged with leading the world, it cannot be hindered by the same rules and laws as other countries, nor should it bend to the rules of multilateral forces such the United Nations and international treaties. In other words, the laws of international affairs are made to keep other countries in check, not the United States. Again, this position is derived from the idea that the United States has a unique mission in global affairs and, thus, it must be treated differently (Pease, 2009). There are a number of recent examples of the United States embracing this foreign policy orientation, including the United States' decision to ignore the United Nations Security Council when declaring war on Iraq in 2003, its refusal to participate in the International Criminal Court, and its recent withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement. From this perspective, the United States should engage primarily in unilateral foreign policies and function in a way that is exempt from the rules and laws that other countries must follow.

A second foreign policy orientation, according to Restad (2014), is referred to as *internationalism*, which is based on the idea that because the United States is a special world power, it should actively engage the international community and seek to spread its influence around the world. This notion emerged after the end of World War II when the United States assumed the position as one of two global superpowers and, in the eyes of many Americans, the sole moral superpower. Throughout the Cold War U.S. presidents regularly championed American style democracy and capitalism as the superior alternative to Soviet style communism (McCracken, 2003). Additionally, from this perspective, it was not enough that the United States served as a model for others to emulate, it was important for the country to actively seek ways to spread American values throughout the international community. The most recent example can be found in the policies of George W. Bush of promoting—often forcefully—democracy and American values around the world (Edwards & Weiss, 2012). The assumption here is that the world is better off when the United States is actively engaged and leading the international community. These foreign policy preferences are likely to be widely supported by U.S. citizens. It is also likely that the different types of political messages we are interested in—ones either challenging or championing American exceptionalism—are likely to impact people's levels of support. Specifically, we expect messages championing American exceptionalism to be more likely to elicit support for each of these foreign policy attitudes than ones challenging the idea. In particular, messages that reify the belief in American exceptionalism are likely to solidify people's belief in these related foreign policy approaches. On the other hand, messages that

outright challenge the United States' exceptional standing in the world are more likely to diminish citizens' willingness to support these types of U.S. foreign policy orientations. In other words, because the messages bring into doubt the country's uniqueness and superior standing in world affairs, the cognitive connection between one's sense of American exceptionalism and the belief that it should be exempt and the leader on the world stage is muddled. We, therefore, offer the following expectations:

H3: Messages challenging American exceptionalism will spur weaker support for the idea that the United States should operate unilaterally within the international system and be exempt from international rules than will messages that champion American exceptionalism.

H4: Messages challenging American exceptionalism will spur weaker support for the idea that the United States should be an active member of the international community and spread its values abroad than will messages that champion American exceptionalism.

Methods

To examine these relationships, we conducted an experiment of college students recruited from a large northwestern university. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. In both conditions, respondents were asked to read a news article, then to fill out a questionnaire. All articles simulated actual news reports by Newsweek. Each one reported exclusively on U.S. government officials' interpretations of the United States in world affairs. In the first condition, the officials championed the idea of American exceptionalism. In the second condition, the officials challenged the

idea of American exceptionalism. Specifically, it included a number of declarations that the United States was no longer “Number 1” in world affairs. Each condition included quotes and paraphrasing from U.S. leaders.

A total of 359 adults completed the survey and were included in the analysis. The study population was slightly more female (57%) and consisted of a large population of White respondents (50%), followed by Asian Americans (32%), African Americans (4.6%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders (2.6%), Native Americans (.3%), and unidentified or mixed ethnic groups (10%). The mean age of participants was between 21 and 29. The study population was slightly more Christian (51%) than non-Christian. Education was measured on a 6-point scale (*Mdn* = 3.0, Some college, but no degree; *Mode* = 3.0, bachelor degree). Income was measured on an 11-point scale (*Mdn* = 1.00, \$0 - \$9,999). Political party was measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from “Strong Republican” to “Strong Democrat” (*M* = 3.35, *SD* = .99). Finally, political ideology was measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from “Extremely liberal” to “Extremely conservative” (*M* = 3.48, *SD* = 1.31). Before testing our expectations, we ran reliability tests on a number of composite variables central to the study. All items were measured on a four-point scale with the following options: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree.

National Exceptionalism Bias

First we tested the reliability of the two separate components of the national exceptionalism bias (Gilmore, 2015). The first component, an American Exceptionalism Worldview, included the following ten measures: “Americans are a uniquely blessed

people” ($M=2.61$, $SD=.85$); “God has chosen the United States to be the strongest force for good in the world” ($M=1.63$, $SD=.75$); “America does things differently than the rest of the world” ($M=3.01$, $SD=.59$); “America has a unique set of values that sets it apart from the world” ($M=2.77$, $SD=.71$); “The American people are the most amazing people in the world” ($M=1.87$, $SD=.69$); “America is the greatest country on earth” ($M=2.66$, $SD=.78$); “The United States is uniquely different from every other country on earth” ($M=3.01$, $SD=.63$); “In the eyes of God, the United States is the same as all other countries” (Reverse Coded, $M=2.12$, $SD=.90$); “The United States has a special role to play in the world” ($M=3.13$, $SD=.62$); and “The United States is the most important country in the world” ($M=2.16$, $SD=.83$). We combined all of these items into a composite variable ($\alpha = .74$).

The second component of national exceptionalism bias, a degradation of others, consisted of the following seven measures: “In comparison to the United States, other countries are simply inferior” ($M=2.19$, $SD=.74$); “People from other countries wish they were as fortunate as Americans are” ($M=2.81$, $SD=.70$); “People in other countries don’t value freedom like we do in the United States” ($M=1.87$, $SD=.77$); “In the eyes of God, other countries are not as favored as the United States” ($M=1.63$, $SD=.65$); “Other countries have inferior values to those in the United States” ($M=1.98$, $SD=.67$); “Other governments are weaker than the United States government” ($M=2.47$, $SD=.75$); and “Other countries are not as unique as the United States” ($M=1.94$, $SD=.72$). We combined all of these items into a composite variable ($\alpha = .73$).

Foreign Policy Attitude Measures

We then turned to test the reliability of the two measures of people's attitudes about potential foreign policy approaches for the United States. The first examined people's attitudes about whether or not the United States should operate unilaterally and be exempt from the same rules and regulations followed by other countries. This component consisted of the following nine items: It is acceptable for the United States to invade other countries if it is for the right reasons ($M=2.44$, $SD=.79$); The United States should always stand up for what is right, even if it means breaking the rules ($M=2.81$, $SD=.70$); The United States should be able to sidestep the United Nations when necessary ($M=2.04$, $SD=.77$); The United States should not have to play by the same rules as other countries ($M=1.78$, $SD=.70$); The United Nations Security Council should have final say over all U.S. military action abroad (reverse coded, $M=2.56$, $SD=.74$); The United States should have to abide by all international laws even if they conflict with America's national interests (reverse coded, $M=2.15$, $SD=.74$); International law is to keep other countries in check, but not the United States ($M=1.74$, $SD=.65$); In general, international law is a set of binding rules that all countries should follow (reverse coded, $M=1.99$, $SD=.61$); The United States should be exempt from certain international laws ($M=1.81$, $SD=.62$). We combined all of these items into a composite variable ($\alpha = .73$).

Next, we tested the reliability of the questions measuring people's support for an internationalist foreign policy orientation for the United States. This component consisted of the following seven items: It is America's responsibility to promote democracy in other countries ($M=2.30$, $SD=.71$); The United States should lead the way in spreading freedom around the world ($M=2.76$, $SD=.75$); The United States should let other

countries take the lead in world affairs (reverse coded, $M=2.75$, $SD=.58$); The United States needs to make it a priority to regain the admiration of the rest of the world ($M=2.50$, $SD=.80$); It is the responsibility of the United States to protect the peace in world affairs ($M=2.47$, $SD=.74$); The United States should always lead the way in protecting human rights anywhere in the world ($M=2.89$, $SD=.74$). We combined all of these items into a composite variable ($\alpha = .72$).

National Identification

Finally, to measure national identification we began with three items from a scale of national attachment created by Huddy and Khatib (2007): “The term *American* does not describes me well” (Reverse coded, $M = 2.81$, $SD = .78$), “I feel close to other Americans” ($M = 3.05$, $SD = .71$), and “Being an American isn’t an important part of who I am” ($M = 2.91$, $SD = .68$). We created four additional measures of national identification: “I feel personally criticized when I hear people from other countries criticizing Americans” ($M = 2.58$, $SD = .75$); “I consider myself to be a typical American” ($M = 2.67$, $SD = .73$); I feel ashamed or embarrassed when other Americans look bad in the world ($M = 2.87$, $SD = .73$); and “If I were to travel abroad, it would be important to me to tell people that I am proud to be an American” ($M = 2.45$, $SD = .80$). A composite variable of national identification was created from these seven measures ($\alpha = .73$).

Results

National exceptionalism bias

Our first two hypotheses focus on the potential impacts that challenges to American exceptionalism may have on the two components of the national exceptionalism bias: national exceptionalism worldview and degradation of others. Our first expectation was that respondents exposed to challenges to American exceptionalism would express a lower exceptionalism worldview. To assess this expectation, we ran a sequential linear regression across experimental conditions with national exceptionalism worldview as the dependent variable. Independent variables were entered sequentially in the following order: gender, level of education, race, age, income, religion, ideology, party, and national identification in the first set; degradation of others in the second set; and message condition in the third set. The results are in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

There are a number of important findings in Table 1. First and foremost, as the results in the third model show, those respondents exposed to the message condition that challenged the United States' exceptional international status were more likely to have a lower sense of national exceptionalism than those exposed to messages championing the idea. This impact was still significant even when controlling for all other potential factors in each individual's construction of their own sense (or lack thereof) of American exceptionalism and was the third largest predictor in the model with a beta of $-.12$. These findings, therefore, lend significant support for Hypothesis 1. Second, the model accounts for a full 51 percent of variance in national exceptionalism worldview. Third, it is important to note the distinct factors at play in one's construction of a sense of American exceptionalism. Specifically, it is interesting to see that males tended to have stronger

national exceptionalism worldviews than their female counterparts. Furthermore, Christians tended to have a higher sense of national exceptionalism than their non-Christian counterparts and those who had higher senses of national identification followed the same tendency. Finally, it is important to note that the other component of the national exceptionalism bias—degradation of others—is, indeed, highly predictive of the exceptionalism worldview with the strongest beta in the model ($\beta = .51$) but does seem to be tapping into a distinct cognitive move. We examine this more in the next hypothesis.

Our second hypothesis deals with the second component of the national exceptionalism bias: the degradation of other countries. Specifically, we expected that because respondents would tend to have a lower national exceptionalism worldview when exposed to challenges to American exceptionalism, they would tend to compensate by increasing their willingness to degrade other countries by comparison. To assess this expectation, we ran a sequential linear regression across experimental conditions with degradation of others as the dependent variable. Independent variables were entered sequentially in the following order: gender, level of education, race, age, income, religion, ideology, party, and national identification in the first set; national exceptionalism worldview in the second set; and message condition in the third set. The results are in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

There are a number of important findings in Table 2. First and foremost, as expected, those respondents exposed to a message challenging American exceptionalism

were more likely to explicitly degrade other countries than those exposed to messages that champion the idea. This supports our expectation that respondents would compensate for their own tendency to accept a negative evaluation of their own national group by “lashing out” at other countries. Second of all, the final model accounts for a full 42 percent of variance in the degradation of other countries. It is also important to note that this impact was still significant after controlling for other potentially central variables. Third, it is important to note that there were relatively few influential variables in the equation. Specifically, as would be expected, national exceptionalism worldview played a central predictive role with a beta of .60. In addition, however, political ideology also had marginal predictive impacts with conservatives more likely to degrade other countries than their liberal counterparts. Finally, it should be noted that the power of national identification as a measure was completely erased by the predictive power of the national exceptionalism worldview in this case. This suggests that attachment to one’s own national group is not as clearly predictive of the degradation of other countries as is the worldview that the United States is the exceptional country on the international stage.

Foreign Policy Attitudes

Next, we sought to delve deeper into the impacts that challenges to American exceptionalism could have on people’s foreign policy attitudes. First, for Hypothesis 3 we expected the challenges to American exceptionalism would tend to decrease people’s support for the idea that the United States should operate unilaterally and be exempt from international rules and institutions. Second, for Hypothesis 4 we expected that challenges to American exceptionalism would also decrease people’s willingness to support the idea

of internationalism and the idea that the United States should spread its values in the world. To test these expectations, we ran sequential linear regressions across experimental conditions with America as exempt and spreading American values as the dependent variables. Independent variables were entered sequentially in the following order: gender, level of education, race, age, income, religion, ideology, party, and national identification in the first set; national exceptionalism worldview and degradation of others in the second set; and message condition in the third set. The findings for both hypotheses are in Table 3.

[Table 3 about here]

There are a number of important findings in Table 3. In relation to Hypothesis 3, the findings in the left column do not support our expectation. Specifically, after controlling for all potential factors, the message condition did not seem to have any significant impact on respondents' willingness to say that they United States should be work as a lone and untethered force in global affairs. That said, it is important to note the other factors that were predictive of this attitude, which accounted for 32 percent of variance. In particular, the model shows that of the demographic variables, people's political ideology was the only significant predictor, with conservatives more than liberals willing to say that the United States should be exempt from international rules and organizations. Furthermore, both components of the national exceptionalism bias were the two strongest predictors of this attitude in the model and again eradicated the predictive power of the national identification variable.

Next, there are a number of important findings in relation to Hypothesis 4. First, the findings in the right column strongly support our expectation in that the message manipulation was a significant predictor of the attitude that the United States should spread its values abroad even after controlling for other potentially strong predictors. Specifically, those exposed to challenges to American exceptionalism were less likely to support this foreign policy position than those exposed to messages championing the idea. Furthermore, the message manipulation was the third largest predictor in the model with a beta of .14. Second, the variables in the model accounted for a robust 34 percent of variance in the final model. Third, it is important to note all significant predictors in the model. Specifically, the findings suggest that women, more so than men, tend to support this policy position. Furthermore, the findings also suggest that those with stronger senses of national identification also tend to support this policy. Finally, again it is important to note the central predictive impact that national exceptionalism worldview plays in the model, with a standardized beta ($\beta = .40$) of almost twice as much as national identification ($\beta = .21$).

Further Analysis

Because messages challenging American exceptionalism influenced respondents to back away from their support for more interventionist foreign policies, we decided to examine whether the messages might also spur respondents to then turn their support to a more isolationist approach to foreign policy. In other words, if the United States should not intervene as much in international affairs, it should then focus more directly on domestic issues. To explore the potential impacts of the messages on these measures, we

ran independent sample t-tests on the following two measures: The United States should focus less on international affairs ($M = 2.30$, $SD = .72$) and The United States should not be involved in the domestic issues of other countries ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .67$). The findings are in Table 4.

[Table 4 about here]

In both cases, those exposed to messages challenging American exceptionalism were much more likely to support the idea that the United States should focus more on domestic affairs than on intervening in the affairs of other countries. These findings further support the notion that when American exceptionalism is championed and reified, people are more confident about the positive impacts that the United States can have on the world. When American exceptionalism is challenged, however, people are less confident about the United States on the global stage and are more inclined to focus on domestic affairs. We reflect on the importance of this in relation to U.S. foreign policy, public opinion, and the presidency of Donald Trump below.

Discussion

This study examines the impacts that messages championing or challenging American exceptionalism can have of U.S. citizen attitudes and worldviews. It builds on previous research examining the overall potency and pervasiveness in American political discourse (Edwards, 2008; Edwards & Weiss, 2011; Ivie & Giner 2009; Neumann & Coe, 2011; Restad, 2014; Pease, 2009), adds new perspectives to research examining the impacts that these potent messages have on U.S. populations (Gilmore & Rowling, 2017), and contributes to the conversation about effective modes of public diplomacy (Sheafer

& Shenhav, 2009). Specifically, we examined how messages that reify or challenge American exceptionalism can impact Americans' views toward their own nation, their willingness to denigrate other countries, and their broader preferences regarding how the United State should approach international relations. We wish to highlight several important findings.

First, our findings show that messages championing or challenging American exceptionalism had differential impacts on both components of the national exceptionalism bias (Gilmore, 2015). Specifically, we found that those exposed to messages championing American exceptionalism had a more facile cognitive road to expressing their own belief in the same idea. Specifically, respondents were more likely to highlight their own exceptionalism worldview when the message championed American exceptionalism than those who were exposed to messages challenging it. As a product of this, we also found that those exposed to these challenging messages were also more likely to actively degrade other countries than those exposed to messages championing the idea. These findings are consistent with previous scholarship (Bandura, 1990; Gilmore & Rowling, 2017; Gilmore, Meeks, & Domke, 2013), which suggests that when people are confronted with potentially harmful characteristics of their own national group, they tend to find ways to target other national groups to diminish the impact on the image of their national group.

Second, this study further tested the parameters of the national exceptionalism bias as a strong predictive cognitive measure and one that functions distinctly from measures of national identity (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). Specifically, our findings suggest

that although the American exceptionalism worldview and citizens' willingness to degrade other cultures are highly related cognitive concepts, they are not perfectly predictive of one another (Gilmore, 2015). In other words, it is one thing for someone to openly champion the idea that their country is singular, superior or God-favored, but it is quite another for them to willingly and explicitly degrade other countries at the same time. Furthermore, the final model showed how each component of the bias can be a strong predictive cognitive variable. For example, in the case of people's beliefs in the idea that the United States should spread its values in the world, we found the American exceptionalism worldview to be uniquely predictive among all other measures. On the more hardline idea that the United States should be exempt from international rules and regulations, it was people's willingness to degrade other cultures—in addition to the exceptionalism worldview—that was the most powerful predictor. In both cases, the exceptionalism bias measures seemed to better explain these related attitudes than national identity because of their relevance to the ideas at hand, but also because they tap into a multifaceted approach to understanding national identity.

Third, we found that messages referencing American exceptionalism can also impact people's own foreign policy preferences. Specifically, we found that messages that champion American exceptionalism tend to spur stronger support for an internationalist foreign policy orientation (Restad, 2014) and the idea that the United States should seek to spread American values in the world. At the same time, messages that challenge the country's superior international status tend to have an opposing impact, spurring respondents to be less willing to think that the United States should be actively

involved in global affairs. Furthermore, we found that individuals exposed to these messages were also more likely to support more isolationist approaches to foreign policy. We did not, however, find these impacts on citizens' willingness to say that the United States should function unilaterally and be exempt from international laws and rules. Such a hardline perspective, we argue, is more likely to be dispositional and, therefore, tied to more deeply held beliefs such as the two components of the national exceptionalism bias.

Overall, the findings raise a number of important questions for future research. First, in this new era of Donald Trump, American exceptionalism has come, yet again, to the fore of political discourse. Future research should examine the various ways in which President Trump seeks to invoke this idea and how those messages impact the ways that Americans understand their country in relation to the rest of the world. With Trump's tendency of avoiding the terminology of American exceptionalism, favoring a more critical approach to describing the United States, will people follow suit in a more "America first" approach to foreign policy that sees the United States focusing more on domestic issues than on active international engagement. Our findings lend initial support for this notion, which raises the question: If Trump begins to abandon his overt criticism of the country's international standing and chooses to champion American exceptionalism more, will support for this more isolationist approach wane?

Furthermore, how will these critical messages impact citizens' national exceptionalism biases? Will the decrease in presence of *exceptionalism worldview* themes in his presidential discourse impact people's likelihood of *degrading other countries* to help balance the negative image of the United States fostered by Trump? Will these

negative tendencies be exacerbated by Trump's willingness to target certain minority and immigrant groups in his discourse and policies? Future research should examine the impacts of these types of messages on xenophobia and nationalistic feelings in the country. Others might examine Trump's rhetoric about American exceptionalism in particular to discover how his polarizing voice might disrupt some traditionally held beliefs on both sides of the political isle.

Second, it will be important to examine the impacts that Trump's unorthodox approach to American exceptionalism may have on Republicans' own national exceptionalism biases and foreign policy preferences. Specifically, since announcing his candidacy for president, Trump's approach to American exceptionalism has clashed with the traditional Republican line of unabashed and uncritical support for the idea. The "America First" approach seemingly breaks from Republican foreign policy norms, as they tend to favor free trade and more open engagement with the world. In particular, how will Republican citizens reconcile Trump's messages with their own potentially conflicting foreign policy preferences? Furthermore, if the Obama presidency and the 2016 Democratic National Convention are any indication, how will Republicans respond to the fact that the Democrats are beginning to champion American exceptionalism and patriotism just as loud, if not louder, than Republicans? Future research should examine the impacts that the speaker's party affiliation can have on partisan attitudes and actions on both sides of the political isle.

Finally, our findings only speak to the impacts of these messages inside the United States. It is important to also understand that the other important side of American

exceptionalism deals with how the country is perceived abroad and how this impacts the image of the United States in world affairs. In fact, the idea that the United States is a shining city on a hill, one that the rest of the world should follow and emulate, can be one of the most powerful and compelling parts of American exceptionalism. Early indications have pointed to a Trump administration desire to reinstate internationally unpopular practices such as torture and CIA black site prisons that have been proven to damage the United States' image in many international circles. Such policies are likely to damage the image of the United States as a global moral leader and model. Future research should examine the impacts that specific policies and strategic messaging about American exceptionalism can have in other countries. Specifically, if people in other countries see American foreign policies contradicting the messaging an allure of American exceptionalism, will support for U.S. global leadership decline? Will the power of America's image diminish compared to the rising influence of ant-democratic leaders such as Vladimir Putin? Future research, therefore, should focus on the differential impact of American exceptionalism messaging to competing narratives on the international stage. Overall, with the recent shifts in the world order—from BREXIT and the election of Donald Trump to the rise of nationalistic politicians in Europe and strongman leaders such as Vladimir Putin and Rodrigo Duterte—the future of American exceptionalism is facing a period of redefinition. Understanding the appeal of this idea at both at home and abroad will, therefore, be integral to understanding the United States' new place in the world.

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Tables

Table 1: *Regression model predicting national exceptionalism worldview, isolating the impact of challenges and reifications of American exceptionalism.*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	β	β	β
Gender (Male/Female)	-.15**	-.11**	-.11**
Education Level	.03	.02	.02
Race (White/Other)	.02	.01	.00
Age	-.02	.00	.01
Income	.01	.00	-.01
Religion (Christian/Other)	-.14**	-.11**	-.11**
Political Ideology (Lib/Con)	.08	.02	.01
Party (Republican/Democrat)	-.11 [^]	-.09	-.09
National Identification	.40***	.24***	.24***
Degradation of Other Countries		.50***	.51***
Condition (Champion vs Challenge)			-.12*
R^2_{Adjusted}	.29	.50	.51
Change in R^2_{Adjusted}		.21	.01
F for change in R^2_{Adjusted}		141.22***	4.90*

[^] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2: *Regression model predicting American exceptionalism via the degradation of others, isolating the impact of challenges and reifications of American exceptionalism.*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	β	β	β
Gender (Male/Female)	-.09 [^]	.00	.01
Education Level	.02	.00	.00
Race (White/Other)	-.03	-.03	-.02
Age	-.02	-.01	-.02
Income	-.01	-.01	-.01
Religion (Christian/Other)	-.06	.03	.03
Political Ideology (Lib/Con)	.17*	.11 [^]	.10 [^]
Party (Republican/Democrat)	.00	.06	.05
National Identification	.31***	.08	.07
American exceptionalism worldview		.59***	.60***
Condition (Champion vs Challenge)			.09*
R^2_{Adjusted}	.17	.41	.42
Change in R^2_{Adjusted}		.24	.01
F for change in R^2_{Adjusted}		141.22***	4.90*

[^] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3: *Regression model predicting support for unilateral internationalism, isolating the impact of challenges and reifications of American exceptionalism.*

	Unilateralism/ Exemption from Global Rules	Internationalism/ Spread American Values
	Final β	Final β
<u>Block 1</u>		
Gender (Male/Female)	-.04	.09*
Education Level	-.01	.01
Race (White/Other)	.04	.02
Age	.08	.01
Income	-.05	.01
Religion (Christian/Other)	-.03	-.04
Political Ideology (Lib/Con)	.17*	.01
Party (Republican/Democrat)	.03	.08
National Identification	.03	.21***
<u>Block 2</u>		
Exceptionalism Worldview	.26***	.40***
Degradation of Others	.28***	.10 [^]
<u>Block 3</u>		
Condition (Champion vs Challenge)	-.04	-.14**
Final R^2_{Adjusted}	.32	.34
F for change in final R^2_{Adjusted}	.86	9.62**

[^] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4: *Independent samples t-test examining the differential impacts of messages championing or challenging American exceptionalism on isolationist policy preferences.*

	Champion American Exceptionalism	Challenge American Exceptionalism
The United States should focus less on international affairs	2.18 (n=170)	2.41 (n=183)
$t(354) = -2.91, p = .002$		
The United States should not be involved in the domestic issues of other countries	2.57 (n=170)	2.76 (n=183)
$t(355) = -2.79, p = .003$		