Lighting the Beacon: Presidential Discourse, American Exceptionalism, and Public Diplomacy in Global Contexts

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Abstract

The idea of American exceptionalism has shaped American politics and captivated audiences for centuries. This study examines the global contexts in which U.S. presidents have invoked the idea of American exceptionalism when addressing foreign audiences since the end of World War II. Our results reveal: (a) differences in how U.S. presidents invoke American exceptionalism when speaking to a global audience (e.g. the United Nations) versus more localized, foreign audiences within individual states; (b) significant variation regarding which countries are more likely to be targets of American exceptionalism in U.S. presidential discourse; and (c) the profound impact that the end of the Cold War had on these dynamics.

Lighting the Beacon: Presidential Discourse, American Exceptionalism, and Public Diplomacy in Global Contexts

On September 20, 2016, U.S. president Barack Obama stood before the United Nations General Assembly for the last time as president. With the election looming at home, he spoke of a choice facing the global community. In particular, recognizing that the “forces of globalization that have made us interdependent have also exposed deep fault lines in the international order,” Obama suggested that each country must now choose between embracing the American model of “open markets and accountable governance, of democracy and human rights and international law” or the more draconian model of “religious fundamentalism, the politics of ethnicity or tribe or sect, aggressive nationalism...[and] crude populism” (Obama 2016). To him, the choice was clear:

My belief that governments serve the individual, and not the other way around, is shaped by America’s story. Our nation began with a promise of freedom that applied only to the few. But because of our democratic Constitution, because of our Bill of Rights, because of our ideals, ordinary people were able to organize, and march, and protest, and ultimately, those ideals won out...I know that for most of human history, power has not been unipolar...America has been a rare superpower in human history insofar as it has been willing to think beyond narrow self-interest...we have strived, sometimes at great sacrifice, to align better our actions with our ideals. And as a consequence, I believe we have been a force for good.

In effect, Obama's speech seemed to echo what so many U.S. presidents before him had emphasized—that America is a “shining city upon a hill” that stands as a model for the rest of the international community to follow.

Although the invocation of American exceptionalism was one of the central tenets of the Obama presidency (Gilmore, Sheets, and Rowling 2016), in modern history, it has become a pervasive tactic used by U.S. presidents to unify the American public as well as connect the United States with the rest of the world. Indeed, over the past decade, several studies have sought to better understand how and why the idea of American exceptionalism has come to be so pronounced in public discourse within the United States (Edwards 2008; Edwards and Weiss 2011; Ivie and Giner 2009; Neumann and Coe 2011; Rojecki 2008; Pease 2009). Research, however, has only just begun to explore how this concept is conceived and communicated within international contexts (Gilmore 2014). This is notable, given that the invocation of American exceptionalism would seem to be driven by entirely different motivations and have much different effects when expressed in front of a domestic audience versus a foreign one. Indeed, the idea of American exceptionalism, a concept deeply rooted in national identity and designed to appeal to and unify the American public, would seem to be a natural fit within a domestic setting; in contrast, the fit is not so natural for foreign audiences, especially those who might view their own countries as exceptional. Thus, U.S. presidents are often confronted with a dilemma of sorts when speaking to foreign audiences: they must be ever mindful of a domestic audience that expects its leaders to champion American exceptionalism on the world stage, but also sensitive to the interests and identities of other global actors. As a result, U.S. presidents are strategically compelled to find creative ways to frame American exceptionalism in a more

diplomatic manner when speaking in different foreign contexts—deftly appealing to the national identity without showing disrespect to others around the world.

With this in mind, we explore how U.S. presidents have sought to communicate American exceptionalism when addressing foreign audiences. Specifically, we argue that even though U.S. presidents do highlight American exceptionalism when speaking in international contexts, they do so in somewhat nuanced and strategic ways. To examine these dynamics, we content analyzed U.S. presidential addresses delivered in global contexts from the end of World War II until the end of the Obama administration on January 20, 2017. Specifically we sought to identify the various ways in which U.S. presidents have sought to invoke the idea of American exceptionalism in global contexts. Overall, our study builds on previous work (Gilmore 2014), which compared how and to what extent U.S. presidents have invoked American exceptionalism when speaking to foreign versus domestic audiences in the aggregate (regardless of context). The present study expands on this research by revealing: (a) substantial differences in how U.S. presidents invoke American exceptionalism when speaking to a global audience (e.g. the United Nations) versus more localized, foreign audiences within individual states; (b) significant variation regarding which countries are more likely to be targets of American exceptionalism versus others in U.S. presidential discourse; and (c) the profound impact that the end of the Cold War had on these dynamics.

Presidential Discourse and American Exceptionalism

The concept of American exceptionalism has become one of the most common features in U.S. political discourse. Politicians regularly invoke this idea to appeal to the American public and to inspire in them a sense of national grandeur (Madsen 1998; Lockhart 2003). Furthermore, research has shown American exceptionalism to be increasingly prevalent in news coverage of

both domestic and foreign affairs (Rojecki 2008). Scholarship suggests that such discourse, designed to set the country apart from or above its international counterparts, is particularly prevalent in the public communications of U.S. presidents (Edwards 2008; Gilmore, Sheets, and Rowling 2016; Neumann and Coe 2011). This is likely due, at least in part, to the broad acceptance and perpetuation of this idea within the American psyche (Gamson 1992; Gilmore 2015; Hodgson 2009; Lipset 1996; Pease 2009; Snow and Benford 1988). By elevating the United States to such an exceptional status, U.S. presidents are not only able to bolster the national identity in general, but they are also able to instill within the American public a sense of hope and optimism about the future of the country (Edwards and Weiss 2011). An exceptional nation, from this perspective, can overcome any obstacle and always faces a bright future.

Indeed, American exceptionalism is a particularly important idea that appeals widely across the American public. Nonetheless, recent studies have shown that while the idea of American exceptionalism seems ideally suited for domestic consumption, U.S. presidents have also looked for ways to champion this idea when speaking to foreign audiences. Specifically, Gilmore (2014) found that U.S. presidents from 1933-2014 invoked American exceptionalism in 34 percent of their speeches to foreign audiences, but that they tended to “translate” the idea of American exceptionalism within these global contexts by employing distinct thematic and discursive tactics that served to render it less nationalistic and much more diplomatic. For example, U.S. presidents might choose to leave out the domestically popular and rhetorically common phrasing, “The United States is the greatest country the world has ever known” when addressing foreign audiences, and replace it with something more diplomatic, such as, “The United States stands as a model for the world to follow.” With a watchful audience at home, U.S.

presidents, we argue, are likely to champion American exceptionalism when abroad, but to do so without deliberately or explicitly showing disrespect to other global actors.

According to this work, there are three distinct ways in which U.S. presidents might invoke American exceptionalism: *explicit*, *implicit*, and *mutual* (Gilmore 2014). First, *explicit* (or primary) themes of American exceptionalism involve overtly positioning the United States above all other countries. These themes are direct and to the point, and they leave no room for interpretation. In particular, three subthemes fall within this category. The first subtheme categorizes the United States as singular or *unique* within the international system. This involves consciously distinguishing the United States from others by highlighting its unique qualities and characteristics. This might include, for example: “The United States values freedom unlike any other country in the world.” The second subtheme is perhaps a more blatant form of American exceptionalism in that it portrays the United States as *superior* to all other nations. This might involve, for example, highlighting America’s superior economic or military power, or emphasizing its unparalleled values and virtues within the international system. Perhaps the most common invocation of this subtheme can be found in the simple phrase: “the United States is the greatest country on earth.” The final subtheme is deeply rooted in the country’s religious history in that it categorizes the United States as *God-favored* within the international system. A president might say, for example: “The United States was chosen by God to save the world from itself.” Together, these explicit themes represent the most forceful and unapologetic—and perhaps the least diplomatic—way in which U.S. presidents might invoke American exceptionalism in their public discourse.

Second, *implicit* (or secondary) themes of American exceptionalism are more diplomatic in tone because while they do highlight American exceptionalism, they do so in a much more

implied manner. Specifically, these themes focus on the distinct roles that the United States can take in world affairs. Two sub-themes fall within this category. The first sub-theme portrays the United States as a *model* for the rest of the world to follow. From this view, the United States has qualities that make it ideal for other countries to emulate. This subtheme is evident, for example, in the statement: “Our democracy is the model for the rest of the world.” Although such a statement invokes American exceptionalism, it does so with a degree of restraint. Specifically, it champions American exceptionalism without explicitly comparing the United States with its global counterparts. The second sub-theme highlights American *leadership* in the world. This is reflected in the following statement: “The United States leads the world in freedom of expression.” Again, this sub-theme appeals to American exceptionalism, but it is more measured in its content than explicit themes of American exceptionalism. Specifically, it speaks more to the role that the United States plays in international affairs than to its exceptional positionality over other countries. Thus, these implicit themes are more diplomatic in nature; while American exceptionalism is indeed embedded within them, such statements can be seen as less arrogant and more focused on persuading others within the world to respect the United States and follow its lead.

Finally, *mutual exceptionalism* involves a rhetorical tactic in which a speaker highlights another country as exceptional in the same statement that American exceptionalism is invoked. Mutual exceptionalism, therefore, couples another country with the United States, then casts them both in an exceptional light. A president might say, for example, that the United States and Japan are the “world’s two largest economies” or that China and the United States are “unmatched in political power in world affairs.” Mutual exceptionalism, therefore, allows a U.S. president to assert American exceptionalism in a way that is more palatable to foreign audiences

by virtue of uplifting their nation in a similar way within the same statement. This tactic also has the potential to appease audiences at home who tend to expect their president to champion American exceptionalism when representing their country to the world. Such a tactic, therefore, does double duty in appealing to both domestic and, potentially, foreign audiences. We now turn to the distinct contexts in which U.S. presidents might rely on these different themes of American exceptionalism when addressing foreign audiences.

American Exceptionalism in Distinct Foreign Venues

On the surface, it might not seem to be strategically beneficial or politically prudent for U.S. presidents to invoke American exceptionalism when speaking to foreign audiences. Although it might serve to unite or inspire Americans to rally around a particular policy issue or candidacy, it is likely to have a much different effect on audiences abroad. Like their American counterparts, foreign citizens are invested in their own sense of national identity; as a result, they will not likely be as receptive to—and might even be hostile towards—the idea of American exceptionalism. In other words, it could be seen as a threat to the image of their own nation (Hogg and Abrams 1988). Given this reality, one might imagine, then, that U.S. presidents would be reluctant to invoke such a potentially divisive idea when speaking in global contexts where diplomacy is the order of the day.

Nonetheless, there are two reasons, we argue, why U.S. presidents are likely to feel compelled to communicate the idea of American exceptionalism to people in different countries, despite the potentially negative implications. First, doing so would be consistent with the overall foreign policy orientation of the United States since the end of World War II (Bacevich 2008; McCricken 2003). During this time, the United States has aggressively sought to shape the international system and persuade—if not compel—others to embrace free-markets and

democracy. According to Restad (2015), the power of the United States to achieve these objectives has rested in large part on its ability to speak with an air of legitimacy to the rest of the world as a global hegemon. In this sense, the United States has not only seen itself as a “city on a hill,” but its larger foreign policy strategy has required that others see it as such as well (McCracken 2003). Furthermore, U.S. presidents can use their speeches to circumvent other governments in order to appeal directly to their citizens, instilling in them a sense that the American approach might be a better alternative than what they have. In the words of Barack Obama, “In remote corners of the world, citizens are demanding respect for the dignity of all people, no matter their gender or race or religion or disability or sexual orientation, and those who deny others dignity are subject to public reproach” (Obama 2016).

Second, scholars point out that the American people have come to expect U.S. presidents, in particular, to champion issues relevant to the national identity and the country’s relationship with the international community (Coe et al. 2004; Coe 2007; Coe and Schmidt 2012). Research on social and national identity (Bandura 1990; Tajfel 1981, 1982; Tajfel and Turner 2004) indicates that messages that bolster the standing of one’s own national group serve as a source of self-esteem and pride among citizens because their own personal identity is tied to the image of that national group. Furthermore, scholars across academic disciplines (Anderson 1983; Bar-Tal 2005; Bloom 1990; Huddy and Khatib 2007; Rivenburgh 2000) have suggested that reifying national identity is one of the most potent and effective ways that one can appease an ever watchful, and critical, citizen base. Indeed, if U.S. presidents choose not to invoke American exceptionalism abroad, they can come under intense scrutiny and political fallout at home. Take, for example, the Republican-led attack on Obama in 2009 when he suggested that all countries have their own national exceptionalism (Gingrich and Haley 2011; Romney 2010). This was met

with intense criticism as political opponents challenged Obama's patriotism and questioned whether he believed that America was truly exceptional. In short, with attentive audiences at home and abroad, U.S. presidents are compelled to find creative ways of invoking American exceptionalism with the dual purpose of championing American exceptionalism for national identity building while building diplomatic influence.

There are several venues in which U.S. presidents are given the opportunity to speak directly to foreign audiences (United Nations, foreign legislatures, joint press conferences), but some, we argue, are likely to be viewed as more strategically important than others for espousing American exceptionalism. Specifically, we contend that the president's annual speech before the United Nations General Assembly is likely to be seen as the most strategic for U.S. interests for several reasons. First, the United Nations general assembly provides U.S. presidents with access to the Heads-of-State of countries from around the world, all at the same time. As a result, U.S. presidents are able to project U.S. hegemony and moral leadership to the largest and most diverse collection of world leaders in any global context. Second, such a venue offers U.S. presidents access to audiences throughout the world, due to widespread media coverage. The UN, therefore, serves as the best stage to enact public diplomacy on a mass scale, allowing U.S. presidents to make a pitch for the hearts and minds of audiences around the world. Third, as the United States continues to paint itself as the example that the rest of the world should follow, the UN General Assembly provides U.S. presidents with a venue in which they can differentiate the United States from other countries (e.g., Russia, China, Europe) competing for global influence. Finally, it is simply a place where the United States can assert its influence and power within the international system. Take for example, Barack Obama's speech to the UN General Assembly in 2015 when he said, "As President of the United States, I am mindful of the dangers that we face;

they cross my desk every morning. I lead the strongest military that the world has ever known, and I will never hesitate to protect my country or our allies, unilaterally and by force where necessary.” In this case, Obama uses the UN stage to remind the world, and potential adversaries, of the country’s superior might and power of influence.

It is our contention, then, that U.S. presidents are likely to seek to take advantage of the broad access to a truly global audience, and champion American exceptionalism in a much more pronounced way than when addressing foreign legislatures or conducting joint press conferences. We, therefore, offer our first hypothesis:

H1: U.S. presidents will be more likely to invoke American exceptionalism when addressing the United Nations General Assembly than when addressing specific national audiences in speeches to foreign legislatures and joint press conferences.

It is also likely, however, that U.S. presidents will see the different themes of American exceptionalism—explicit, implicit, and mutual—as being distinctly beneficial, depending on the venue in which they are speaking. We expect, for example, that U.S. presidents will be more likely to employ the *explicit* themes of American exceptionalism when addressing the United Nations General Assembly than when addressing foreign legislatures and in joint press conferences. Again, the venue calls for U.S. presidents to project American power. Conversely, we expect that U.S. presidents will lean much more heavily on *mutual* themes of American exceptionalism when speaking to foreign legislatures and at joint press conferences than when speaking to the United Nations. This is for two reasons. First, the mutual themes are specifically suited for these contexts, as they serve to elevate the other country’s international status alongside American exceptionalism. In these cases, the mutual themes help to bolster the image of the target nation and, in doing so, strengthen the president’s standing in the eyes of that nation.

Second, mutual themes are not a natural fit for the United Nations. By elevating another country to the level of the United States in front of a global audience, it could be seen as undercutting the argument that the United States is uniquely exemplary and worthy of global leadership. Such concerns are unlikely to exist when a U.S. president is addressing a specific foreign audience.

Finally, we contend that U.S. presidents will employ the *implicit* themes of American exceptionalism liberally in all three types of venue. In previous research (Gilmore 2014), we found that U.S. presidents tended to employ these implicit themes regularly in all types of speeches—both domestic and foreign—because it serves to advance American exceptionalism in a much more diplomatic manner. For example, President William Clinton (1993) leaned heavy on implicit themes of American exceptionalism when addressing the South Korean National Assembly, stating, “In truth, our global leadership has never been more indispensable...so long as our flag is a symbol of democracy and hope to a fractious world, the imperative of America’s leadership will remain.” Such a sentiment, therefore, is a potentially effective rhetorical tactic regardless of venue because it champion’s the United States’ leadership as a force for good in the world. We therefore expect U.S. presidents to see implicit exceptionalism themes as beneficial in front of specific national audiences, as well as in front of the more global audience available in the United Nations General Assembly. In light of these perspectives, we offer our second hypothesis:

H2: U.S. presidents will be more likely to favor the *explicit* and *implicit* themes of American exceptionalism when addressing the United Nations and the *mutual* and *implicit* themes when addressing specific national audiences in speeches to foreign legislatures and joint press conferences.

American Exceptionalism in G8+5 versus Non-G8+5 Countries

We are also interested in whether U.S. presidents will likely be strategic in their choice of countries in which to invoke American exceptionalism. Specifically, we assert that the relative power of a given country is likely to influence the frequency with which U.S. presidents are likely to invoke American exceptionalism when addressing those audiences. Research has shown that the invocation of American exceptionalism abroad works to actively position one's own group hierarchically above all other groups (Gilmore 2015; Gilmore and Rowling 2017). This stems from a dynamic referred to by Tajfel and Turner (2004) as "socially creative" maneuvering in intergroup comparisons. Without question, there exists a hierarchical structure within the international system and every country's status is gauged relative to the other countries in the global system. And this status is likely to be agreed upon, albeit tacitly, by all the countries involved (Tajfel 1981). In other words, countries are overtly aware of the hierarchical positioning of countries, especially those that are at the top. While this hierarchical ordering has changed consistently throughout history, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has remained the world's sole superpower. That said, Tajfel (1981) suggests that being the world's sole hegemon brings with it a sense of insecurity, mainly because once deemed on top, other competitive countries are likely to challenge it for its status. Because of this dynamic, the United States is constantly tasked with having to maintain its position, while reminding its competitors of its "superior" status as world leader. George W. Bush, in a 2005 press conference with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, put it simply, "America will continue to lead the world to meet our duty in helping the world's most vulnerable people." It is therefore likely that U.S. presidents will be more inclined to assert American exceptionalism when addressing countries that are strong competitors on the global stage than countries that pose minimal competition to the United States. With this in mind, we offer our third hypothesis:

H3: U.S. presidents will be more likely to invoke American exceptionalism themes when addressing G8+5 countries than when addressing non-G8+5 countries.¹

We are also interested in examining the distinct ways that U.S. presidents might invoke the *mutual* themes of American exceptionalism in these contexts. Specifically, we assert that when invoking *mutual* exceptionalism themes, U.S. presidents are more likely to invoke other powerful and influential countries in the comparative equation than they will less powerful and less influential ones. We expect this for two reasons. First, because the goal of *mutual* exceptionalism is to advance the idea of American exceptionalism on the global stage, it strengthens the image of the United States to place it in company with other powerful and influential countries. For example, in a 2014 press conference with China President Xi Jinping, Obama stated, “as the world’s two largest economies, energy consumers, and emitters of greenhouse gases, we have a special responsibility to lead the global effort against climate change.” In contrast, it could be seen as self-defeating to compare the United States’ exceptional status with less powerful countries on the world stage. Doing so elevates less powerful countries to a potentially exaggerated level, which could be perceived as devaluing the United States in the process. Furthermore, because less powerful countries are keenly aware of the significant power differential between themselves and the United States, *mutual* exceptionalism could be perceived as patronizing and, therefore, it could serve to undercut U.S. interests and diplomatic goals. Furthermore, we expect this differential to apply not only when U.S. presidents address specific foreign publics, but in the United Nations as well. In other words, whether in front of the Japanese Diet or the United Nations General Assembly, U.S. presidents are more likely to engage in *mutual* exceptionalism towards other powerful countries than they would less powerful countries. Thus, we offer our final hypothesis:

H4: U.S. presidents will be more likely to compare the United States with G8+5 countries when employing *mutual* American exceptionalism themes than with non-G8+5 countries.

Potential Impacts of Geopolitical Shifts

Finally, researchers across disciplines have suggested that large geopolitical shifts in the balance of power on the global stage can have deep impacts on U.S. foreign policy and U.S. presidents' diplomatic efforts (Bacevich 2008; Edwards 2008; McCrisken 2003; McEvoy-Levy 2001; Restad 2014). Specifically, scholars point to the end of World War II and the end of the Cold War as the two major geopolitical shifts that impacted the United States in general and American exceptionalism in particular. While many have argued that the end of World War II was the moment when American exceptionalism was reified by the evolving world order, others point more to the end of the Cold War when the United States finally emerged as the world's sole superpower. In previous research, we found that U.S. presidents were significantly more likely to invoke American exceptionalism after the end of the Cold War when addressing domestic audiences than after World War II (Gilmore, Sheets, and Rowling 2016). In the present study, we are interested in examining whether this dynamic plays out similarly when presidents address foreign audiences. We therefore offer the following research question:

RQ1: Did the end of the Cold War and the change in United States' relative global positioning impact U.S. presidential invocations of American exceptionalism in speeches to foreign audiences?

Method

To examine this theorized framework, we conducted a content analysis focused on invocations of American exceptionalism in major presidential speeches delivered to foreign audiences from the end of World War II until the end of the Obama administration on January 20, 2017. All speeches were collected from the American Presidency Project, which is the most comprehensive publicly available archive of U.S. presidential speeches. The data ($n = 532$) consisted of three types of addresses. First, we identified speeches delivered to foreign legislative bodies. In these contexts, U.S. presidents address elite decision-makers within a given foreign country, one of the most direct forms of public diplomacy. Second, we identified speeches delivered by U.S. presidents at the United Nations general assembly. Third, we identified opening remarks by presidents at joint press conferences with foreign leaders. These moments are heavily reported by international news organizations and, thus, are another major way U.S. presidents communicate with international publics. In total, we analyzed 532 international addresses: 70 to foreign legislatures, 48 to the United Nations, and 414 joint press conferences.

We analyzed each address in the same manner. The unit of analysis was the “invocation” of American exceptionalism, which we defined as the presence of a theme at any point in a given speech. Invocations were regularly only parts of sentences. For example, in “The country is the greatest source of inspiration in human history,” we coded the phrase “greatest source of inspiration” as an invocation. The official codebook included three types of invocations—explicit, implicit, and mutual themes—operationalized directly from the interdisciplinary literature on American exceptionalism.

The explicit themes of American exceptionalism were comprised of three overt invocations of American exceptionalism: *singular*, *superior*, or *God-favored*. For the *singular* exceptionalism invocations, we identified any instance in which a president said America or its

people, government, ideas, or founding principles were qualitatively different or unique from the rest of the world. For example, we coded terms and phrases such as *different*, *unique*, *distinct*, *singular*, *only*, *first*, and *special* when referencing the United States. Next, we coded invocations as *superior* when presidents would refer to the country as *more* or *better* than other countries, or the *best* or greatest on earth. Specifically, we coded terms and phrases such as *better*, *best*, *more*, *grander*, *greater*, *greatest*, *stronger*, and *harder working* when used to refer to the United States. For example, we coded the phrase “America is the greatest country in human history” as *superior* exceptionalism. We coded invocations as *God-favored* when presidents referred to the country as being chosen or favored by God. Specifically, invocations had to directly refer to the country as being divinely chosen or favored unlike other countries. We, therefore, did *not* code the phrase “God bless America.”

The implicit themes of American exceptionalism were expressions that referred to the United States as a *model* or *leader* in the global arena. We coded invocations as *model* when presidents referred to the United States using terms such as *model*, *example*, *ideal*, *exemplar*, or a *standard* for other countries. For example, Reagan’s reference to the United States as the “Shining City on a Hill” was coded in this category. We coded invocations as *global leader* when presidents referred to the country as *the* leader on the global stage. For example, we coded instances that referred to the United States as the *global leader*, as *leading the world*, and as *guiding the rest of the world*.

The mutual themes of American exceptionalism were invocations in which American exceptionalism was paired with the exaltation of another country in the same sentence or adjoining sentence. Specifically, these invocations were coded when a president would refer to the United States as singular, superior, or God-favored at the same time referring to another

country as also being such. Most commonly, these invocations came in the form of simultaneous exaltation. For example, if a president said, “Japan and the United States are the world’s two largest economies,” we coded it as *mutual exceptionalism*.

To assess inter-coder reliability, we trained two coders with the codebook and then analyzed a randomly selected sample of roughly 10 percent of the speeches ($n = 53$). This meets the required sample level for reliable inter-coder results (Neuendorf 2016; Riffe, Lacey and Fico 2008). There was a high level of agreement between the coders with a Krippendorff’s alpha of .91 for each type of American exceptionalism (explicit, implicit, mutual) invocations.

Results

Impacts of Speech Venue

The first hypothesis addressed the potential impact that the venue of the speech might have on how commonly U.S. presidents seek to highlight American exceptionalism in foreign speeches. Specifically, we expected that overall, U.S. presidents would be more likely to invoke American exceptionalism in any of its forms in speeches to the United Nations than in speeches to foreign legislatures and in joint press conferences. To test this hypothesis, we determined the frequency and the average amount that U.S. presidents have invoked the distinct types of American exceptionalism in foreign speeches. The findings are shown in Table 1.²

[Table 1 About Here]

The findings on the top row of Table 1 paint a clear picture. U.S. presidents were much more likely to invoke some form of American exceptionalism in speeches to the United Nations than they were in either of the other two venues. Specifically, they invoked American exceptionalism in 83 percent of United Nations speeches—a full 31 points more than in foreign

legislatures and 54 points more than in joint press conferences—and an average of over two times per speech. Overall, U.S. presidents leaned much more heavily on the distinct types of American exceptionalism when addressing the United Nations than in the other venues. These findings lend strong support to Hypothesis 1 and suggest that overall U.S. presidents see the idea of American exceptionalism as better suited for speeches in which they are attempting to build a strong international image of the United States as the one beacon that should set the global agenda for all other countries to follow. In other words, the United Nations is where the U.S. presidents can potentially address *all* national audiences throughout the world at the same time and a place where it can differentiate itself from any competitors, and therefore serves as a prime space for rallying other countries behind it.

The second hypothesis also deals with venue, but specifically examines how U.S. presidents have differentially invoked the American exceptionalism themes. Specifically, we expected that U.S. presidents would tend to rely more on *explicit* and *implicit* themes of American exceptionalism in speeches to the United Nations, but rely much more on *mutual* exceptionalism themes in speeches to specific country contexts. To test this hypothesis we determined the frequency of invocation of the distinct types of American exceptionalism themes invoked in the distinct venues addressing global audiences. The findings are shown in Figure 1 and supplemented by the data in Table 1.

[Figure 1 About Here]

There are a number of interesting findings related to Hypothesis 2. First, as expected, U.S. presidents were much more likely to rely on the *explicit* and *implicit* themes of American exceptionalism in United Nations speeches than in foreign legislatures and joint press conferences. Specifically, they were almost twice as likely to invoke these themes of American

exceptionalism in the United Nations than in foreign legislatures and over seven times more likely in joint press conferences. And while the more diplomatic, *implicit* themes of American exceptionalism were popular in all three categories, U.S. presidents favored them the most when they were before a true global audience in the United Nations. Second, as expected, U.S. presidents were more likely to invoke *mutual* themes of American exceptionalism in foreign legislatures and joint press conferences than in the United Nations. These findings are intuitive in that U.S. presidents are more likely to couple another country's exceptionalism with American exceptionalism when addressing the audience of that specific country and not a more general global audience.

Next, we conducted further analysis to address our research question. Specifically, we compared the invocations of all types of American exceptionalism in the Cold War period to those in the Post-Cold War period in order to get a better understanding of how U.S. presidents invoked this idea in distinct geopolitical periods. The findings are in Table 2.

[Table 2 About Here]

There are a number of interesting findings in Table 2. First, we found that in the Cold War period, Joint Press conferences were not only more scarcely held, but U.S. presidents only rarely employed them for spreading the ideas of American exceptionalism. That changed significantly in the Post-Cold War period, both in terms of the amount (from 6% to 30% of speeches) and rate of invocations (from .06 to .52 average invocations per speech). Second, with regard to foreign legislatures, we found a similar result. During the Cold War period, U.S. presidents were fairly likely to invoke American exceptionalism in foreign deliberative bodies (43% of speeches), but these efforts increased by 20 points in the Post Cold War period (63% of speeches) and increased threefold in their rate of invocation (from .85 to 2.60 average

invocations per speech). Both of these findings suggest that U.S. presidents ramped up their promotion of American exceptionalism once the evolving world order left the United States as the world's sole superpower. Finally, and perhaps most interesting, we did not find this same trend in presidential speeches before the United Nations, with little to no change between amount and rate of invocations. In both periods, U.S. presidents rarely missed the opportunity to invoke American exceptionalism while in the presence of a captive global audience.³ This finding further supports our first hypothesis, which states that U.S. presidents are more likely to view the United Nations as the most important stage for promoting the idea of American exceptionalism.⁴ This leads us to the next hypothesis in which we examine the distinct types of countries to whom U.S. presidents are more or less likely to speak American exceptionalism or engage in mutual exceptionalism whereby another country is deemed exceptional in the same statement that American exceptionalism is invoked.

Types of Countries

The next hypotheses examine whether U.S. presidents are more likely to invoke American exceptionalism in certain countries over others. Specifically, we expected for U.S. presidents to be more likely to speak American exceptionalism to countries that are seen as strong competitive forces on the global stage (H3). Furthermore, we expected U.S. presidents to refer more to strong global competitor countries when invoking *mutual* themes of American exceptionalism than to weaker countries (H4). To capture relative levels of global status, we coded each country as being members—or not—in the Group of Eight (G8), a globally recognized international organization of eight of the world's largest economic and political powers (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, and United Kingdom). As a second step, we sorted countries a second time as being one of the add-on members of the newer G8+5, which

includes G8 countries as well as the world's five leading emerging economies (India, Mexico, Brazil, China, and South Africa). The findings are in Table 3.

[Table 3 About Here]

There are a number of important findings in Table 3. First, in the first row, we see that U.S. presidents were significantly more likely to invoke any type of American exceptionalism in speeches to G8 and G8+5 countries than when speaking to countries not in those categories. Specifically, they were two to three times more likely to invoke American exceptionalism in speeches given in these perceived strong global competitors. These findings lend support to Hypotheses 3. Second, it is interesting to note that this distinction was not found when looking at whether U.S. presidents invoked the more aggressive, *explicit* themes of American exceptionalism. This is most likely due to the fact that U.S. presidents tend to invoke these themes in global contexts less in general, because they are not as diplomacy friendly as the less aggressive *implicit* and *mutual* exceptionalism themes. Third, and perhaps most compelling, U.S. presidents were six to seven times more likely to invoke *mutual* exceptionalism when addressing audiences of G8 (35%) and G8+5 (41%) countries than non-G8+5 countries (4%). These findings lend initial, albeit strong, support for Hypothesis 4. In order to gain a more robust understanding of this comparative dynamic, we determined the proportion of countries that were most frequently invoked as being “exceptional” along with the United States when U.S. president invoked *mutual* themes of American exceptionalism. And indeed, U.S. presidents highly favored the thirteen countries of the G8+5 when elevating nations to the “exceptional” plane of the United States. Specifically, a full 88% of all *mutual* exceptionalism invocations involved G8 or G8+5 countries. These findings suggest that U.S. presidents have clearly been intentional in choosing which countries to “exceptionalize” when addressing global audiences.

Finally, we compared invocations of American exceptionalism in these distinct country groupings between the Cold War and Post-Cold War periods to more fully address our research question. These findings are in Table 4.⁵

[Table 4 About Here]

There are two important findings in Table 4. First, we see that before the end of the Cold War, U.S. presidents were much more likely to champion the idea of American exceptionalism to developing (non-G8) countries than to more developed (G8 and G8+5) countries. Second, we found the reverse to be the case in the Post-Cold War period, with U.S. presidents invoking American exceptionalism more than three times more often in speeches to developed countries than developing countries. These findings suggest that the shifting geopolitical environment had a deep impact on which countries U.S. presidents targeted with American exceptionalism. We discuss the implications of these findings below.

Discussion

In this study, we provided a systematic examination of how and in what contexts U.S. presidents have invoked the idea of American exceptionalism when speaking to foreign audiences. We expected that U.S. presidents would seek to communicate the idea of American exceptionalism when speaking in global contexts in order to assert American power and to strengthen the call for other countries to follow the United States as a global example. Overall, the findings contribute to the growing scholarship on American exceptionalism, suggesting that this concept has become a mainstay in U.S. political discourse both at home (Edwards 2008; Gilmore, Sheets, and Rowling 2016; Neumann and Coe 2011; Pease 2009) and abroad (Gilmore 2014). Moreover, our findings suggest that U.S. presidents are strategic in where and to whom they invoke this idea when speaking to foreign audiences.

In particular, we wish to highlight three important findings. First, the findings show that indeed American exceptionalism has been a central tenet in how U.S. presidents address the global community. That said, our findings suggest that U.S. presidents are strategic and diplomatic in how they invoke this powerful idea, which seems more suited, at least on the surface, for domestic audiences than foreign ones. Second, the results suggest that U.S. presidents strategically invoke American exceptionalism based on the specific global venue in which they are speaking. Specifically, U.S. presidents are much more likely to invoke American exceptionalism in the United Nations General Assembly than when speaking to specific national audiences. We argue that this is likely due to the fact that the General Assembly presents them with access to the world's governments and their respective publics watching at home, which presents an ideal opportunity to portray America as "the beacon on the hill" for the rest of the world to follow. This assertion was further supported by the fact that presidents during and after the Cold War heavily disseminated the idea of American exceptionalism at the United Nations.

Finally, we predicted that U.S. presidents would be more likely to invoke American exceptionalism when speaking to their perceived competitors than when speaking to non-competitor countries. This finding was supported, but only under certain geopolitical circumstances related to the global positioning of the United States. Specifically, we found that during the Cold War, U.S. presidents were more likely to champion American exceptionalism when addressing smaller, developing countries than larger competitor nations. This is likely due to the fact that during this period the United States was actively competing with the Soviet Union for the hearts and minds of these smaller countries (Bacevich 2008; McEvoy-Levy 2001; Restad 2014). Once the Soviet Union fell, however, the United States was left without any true competitor for its hegemony. Our findings, therefore, suggest that once the Soviet Union lost its

global influence, U.S. presidents likely focused their attention towards championing American exceptionalism as a way of reasserting the United States' global hegemony. These findings support the notion of social creativity (Tajfel and Turner 2004), which asserts that because of the United States' superior status, U.S. presidents are likely to feel compelled to assert American exceptionalism in speeches abroad as a way of maintaining the country's image of being hierarchically superior in world affairs.

These findings suggest that the definition and significance of American exceptionalism may be undergoing a marked shift in American foreign policy and public diplomacy. For the duration of the Cold War, the focus of U.S. presidents seemed to be on championing American freedom and democracy to counteract the influence of communism being championed by the Soviet Union. This is perhaps most evident in the statement Ronald Reagan (1989) made famous that America is a "shining city upon a hill" and should stand as a model for the rest of the international community to follow. In the Post-Cold War era, however, the championing of American exceptionalism seems to be moving more towards power-posturing rather than example-setting. This can be seen in the more combative and competitive styling of American exceptionalism by Donald Trump who has focused more on defining it in ways that might be measured (largest military, strongest economy, most competitive) than along the inherent qualities of the nation (indelible American spirit, unique place in history, exemplary political system, global moral leader) that other presidents have included in their own definition of American exceptionalism. This begs the question of whether present and future presidents will continue to employ the more diplomatic forms of American exceptionalism or if they will start to rely more heavily on explicit themes that focus more on asserting American power overtly. Our findings suggest that recent U.S. presidents are already moving towards seeking out ways to

invoke American exceptionalism by speaking power to power. But what remains unclear is whether this will also shape the ways that the American people understand American exceptionalism. In this context, will it also be defined by power and competition alone?

Overall, these findings raise several important questions for future research. First, how will the evolving world order impact not only how U.S. presidents invoke American exceptionalism in global affairs, but the relative power of its message for foreign publics moving forward. On the one hand, many have argued that the post 9/11 global order is marked by a relative “rise of the rest” where the balance of power is moving away from U.S. hegemony and toward a more balanced international order (Zakaria 2011). In such a world, can the U.S. maintain its image as the standard bearer for democratic and economic excellence? Will it even try? This is further exacerbated by the current attempts by Russia to interfere in, and potentially destabilize, elections throughout the world. Specifically, some have suggested that Vladimir Putin is aggressively attempting to reveal the faults of American and Western-style democracy in order to offer a competing narrative. How will these appeals impact the ways in which future U.S. presidents seek to portray the idea of the “city on the hill” for the world? Future research should examine the competing narratives of U.S. presidents versus Russian—and potentially Chinese—leaders in their public diplomacy campaigns to fully understand their potential appeal on the global stage.

Second, how will Donald Trump change the dynamics of American exceptionalism in U.S. foreign policy and diplomatic efforts? Although Trump argued that his run for president was inspired greatly by Ronald Reagan, who again was an unabashed proponent of American exceptionalism, it is unclear as to whether Trump will continue to light the lights of the “city upon the hill” for the world. For instance, in an interview only one month before announcing his

presidential bid, Trump addressed his take on American exceptionalism saying, “I don’t like the term.” According to Trump, the United States is not exceptional any more, but that under his leadership, it has a chance to become exceptional again. Furthermore, he offered, “We may have a chance to say it in the not too distant future, but even then I wouldn’t say it,” because by invoking American exceptionalism in global contexts “we are insulting the world.”⁶ This answer, interestingly, showed a sense of the need to nuance this potent idea, only to be counteracted by Trump’s forceful “America First” worldview, which argues that the United States needs to focus less on leading the world and more on fixing domestic problems. Future research, therefore should examine whether the Trump administration continues to champion America’s example on the world’s stage or whether it will turn inwards, focusing on building domestic indicators of American exceptionalism, while neglecting to carry the banner on the global stage. Furthermore, will the Trump administration make the same nuanced, diplomatic distinctions with the different themes of American exceptionalism shown in this study? In addition, future research should examine if and how Trump’s concept of American exceptionalism differs from his predecessors, how he chooses to manifest it in both domestic and global contexts, and how the world responds.

Third, in the analysis for this paper we found that even though the Republican party associates itself more with overt statements of patriotic sentiment, it has actually been Democratic presidents who have been more fervent in their invocation of American exceptionalism in global contexts (44% of speeches versus 17%). In a previous study (Gilmore, Sheets, and Rowling 2016) we found that Democratic presidents also slightly edge out their Republican counterparts (56% of speeches versus 55%) in their invocation of American exceptionalism in domestic contexts. These findings—in combination with Trump’s unclear stance on the concept American exceptionalism and open willingness to talk about America’s

global inferiority—are potentially concerning for the identity of the Republican Party whose party platform “embraces American exceptionalism and rejects false prophets of decline and diminution” (RNC 2016). Future research should, therefore, examine the redefinition of American exceptionalism, patriotism, and even what it means to be American as both parties seek to retune their identities coming out of the surprise conclusion of the 2016 elections. All of these critical questions are worthy of future scholarly examination.

Overall, this study has further illustrated the complexities of the role that American exceptionalism plays in global affairs. Emerging from the Cold War, many took for granted the idea that the United States had “won” the war for the hearts and minds of the world, that American and Western style democracy and capitalism would increasingly envelope even the most ardent of critics as the world continued to globalized. Few, however, understood just how contentious this idea continued to be in a world filled with fierce competitors vying for those same hearts and minds. Given the fact that the global public sphere continues to be filled with counter-discursive appeals from autocratic and authoritarian regimes, the idea of American exceptionalism has yet again been thrust into the center of a contentious world order not too dissimilar from that of the Cold War. It is, therefore, imperative that research understands the potential competitive appeal of the calls for the Western ideals of democracy and open government embedded in American exceptionalism versus calls for strong-man authoritarianism embedded in messages that point to the United States as an example not to follow. The distinct effectiveness of these dichotomous appeals could define our world for generations.

Notes

¹ We kept Russia in this grouping of G8+5 because of its relative global status even though its membership has been suspended from the group because of its involvement in the 2014 Crimea case in the Ukraine.

² No inferential statistics were computed in this study because we examined a census of speeches.

³ It is further important to note that it wasn't until 1982 that U.S. presidents started giving an annual speech to the United Nations. This further supports the notion that regardless of how frequent their visits, U.S. presidents more frequently than not (more than 3 to 1) saw the United Nations as the most important venue to espouse American exceptionalism.

⁴ It is important to note here that the findings relative to both of the distinct eras—both here in and in the analysis below—were fairly consistent across presidents within those eras. In the aggregate, most presidents employed all three types of American exceptionalism in their speeches. There were only a couple of outliers in either of the eras. For instance, President Lyndon Johnson only invoked the mutual form of exceptionalism in his foreign speeches and Harry Truman and George H.W. Bush (before the end of the Cold War) never invoked the less common explicit forms of American exceptionalism. In the post-Cold War era, George W. Bush and George H.W. Bush were somewhat less likely to invoke the explicit forms of exceptionalism than Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. In the case of the implicit and mutual themes, however, it was only George W. Bush who was less likely than his fellow presidents to invoke these ideas, even though he did employ all three tactics in his speeches. Overall, however, American

exceptionalism in all of its forms was a key component of U.S. presidential speeches across the eras.

⁵ We combined the G8 and G8+5 countries in this analysis because the number of speeches during the Cold War for G8+5 countries was too low (n=9) for an accurate picture. We also wanted to highlight the inverse relationship between the periods and the types of countries.

⁶ David Corn “Donald Trump says he doesn’t believe in “American exceptionalism.” *Mother Jones*, www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/06/donald-trump-american-exceptionalism (accessed January 20, 2017).

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Tables

Table 1: *Explicit, implicit, and mutual themes of American exceptionalism invoked in in Joint Press Conferences, Foreign Legislatures, and the United Nations.*

<i>Types of invocations</i>	Joint Press Conferences (n=414)	Foreign Legislatures (n=70)	United Nations (n=48)
Presence of any type of exceptionalism			
Speeches present in	28%	51%	83%
Average invocations per speech	0.48	1.60	2.33
Explicit exceptionalism themes			
Speeches present in	2%	19%	33%
Average invocations per speech	0.03	0.30	0.58
Implicit exceptionalism themes			
Speeches present in	12%	34%	75%
Average invocations per speech	0.12	0.71	1.54
Mutual exceptionalism themes			
Speeches present in	20%	27%	15%
Average invocations per speech	0.33	0.47	0.21

Table 2: *Comparing the aggregate of American exceptionalism themes (Explicit, implicit, and mutual) invoked between the Cold War and Post Cold War periods in Joint Press Conferences, Foreign Legislatures, and the United Nations.*

<i>Types of invocations</i>	Joint Press Conferences (n=414)	Foreign Legislatures (n=70)	United Nations (n=48)
Presence of <i>any</i> type of exceptionalism			
Post WWII/Cold War (1945-1991) Speeches present in Average invocations per speech	6% 0.06 (n=33)	43% 0.85 (n=40)	83% 2.46 (n=24)
Post Cold War (1991-2017) Speeches present in Average invocations per speech	30% 0.52 (n=381)	63% 2.60 (n=30)	83% 2.21 (n=24)

Table 3: *Explicit, implicit, and mutual themes of American exceptionalism invoked in non-G8, G8, and G8+5 countries.*

<i>Types of invocations</i>	Non-G8 Countries (n=227)	G8 Countries (n=208)	G8+5 Countries (n=49)
Presence of any type of exceptionalism			
Speeches present in	16%	44%	49%
Average invocations per speech	0.32	0.86	1.22
Explicit exceptionalism themes			
Speeches present in	5%	3%	6%
Average invocations per speech	0.08	0.04	0.08
Implicit exceptionalism themes			
Speeches present in	11%	18%	22%
Average invocations per speech	0.17	0.23	0.35
Mutual exceptionalism themes			
Speeches present in	4%	35%	41%
Average invocations per speech	0.07	0.59	0.80

Table 4: *Comparing the aggregate of American exceptionalism themes (Explicit, implicit, and mutual) invoked between the Cold War and Post Cold War periods in non-G8, G8, and G8+5 countries.*

<i>Types of invocations</i>	Non-G8 Countries (n=227)	G8 & G8+5 Countries (n=257)
Presence of <i>any</i> type of exceptionalism		
Post WWII/Cold War (1945-1991) Speeches present in Average invocations per speech	30% 0.56 (n=27)	16% 0.43 (n=46)
Post Cold War (1991-2017) Speeches present in Average invocations per speech	14% 0.31 (n=200)	49% 1.03 (n=211)

Figures

Figure 1: *Explicit, implicit, and mutual themes of American exceptionalism invoked in in Joint Press Conferences, Foreign Legislatures, and the United Nations.*