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Make No Exception, Save One:

American Exceptionalism, the American Presidency, and the Age of Obama

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Abstract

This paper explores the circumstances under which U.S. presidents have invoked the idea of American exceptionalism in major speeches to the nation and how the invocation of this concept has culminated during the Obama presidency. To explore these dynamics, we conducted a content analysis of all major domestic presidential addresses since the end of World War II. We find that U.S. presidents have become increasingly likely to invoke American exceptionalism, particularly after the end of the Cold War, and that in times of national crises, American exceptionalism becomes most pronounced in U.S. presidential discourse. Moreover, we demonstrate the overwhelming propensity of President Obama, relative to his predecessors, to emphasize American exceptionalism in his public communications. The reason, we argue, has to do with the double-crisis nature of his presidency—two major wars and a recession—in addition to the racial bind that he has been forced to overcome throughout his presidency. We reflect on the implications of these findings for politicians, in particular racial and other minorities, as well as the broader American public.

Keywords: Presidential Discourse, American Exceptionalism, National Crisis, Barack Obama, National Identity, Challenges to Patriotism

Make No Exception, Save One:

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In February 2015, former New York City Mayor, Rudy Giuliani, lit up news and social media when he attacked President Barack Obama's patriotism, stating: "I do not believe, and I know this is a horrible thing to say, but I do not believe that the president loves America" (Bever, 2015). The next day, Giuliani defended his comments: "I don't hear from him what I heard from Harry Truman, what I heard from Bill Clinton, what I heard from Jimmy Carter...about what a great country we are, what an exceptional country we are" (Kelly, 2015). Although such statements may have seemed scandalous to some at the time, Giuliani was simply repeating a trope that had become a mainstay in Republican discourse surrounding the Obama presidency.¹ Indeed, as recently as September 2015, former Vice President Dick Cheney, stated: "If you go back 70 years ... you'll find presidents of both parties from FDR and Harry Truman and Jack Kennedy to Nixon and Reagan and the Bushes and forward ... shared a basic fundamental proposition ... that the U.S. did have a role to play in the world as *the* exceptional nation. Barack Obama clearly doesn't believe that" (Hensch, 2015). In essence, political opponents have portrayed Obama as an historical anomaly; according to them, virtually every U.S. president before him—Democrat or Republican—has loved and celebrated American exceptionalism more than he has. Notably, such attacks—combined with allegations that Obama is not a natural-born American citizen—have continued largely unabated, despite the fact that Obama is the first U.S. president to ever employ the terminology, "American exceptionalism," in a speech, and he has

¹ Former Massachusetts Governor, Mitt Romney, for example, stated during the 2012 Presidential Campaign: "Our president doesn't have the same feelings about American exceptionalism that we do. And I think over the last three or four years, some people around the world have begun to question [it]" (Dwyer, 2012). Louisiana Governor, Bobby Jindal (2015), also emphasized in February 2015: "This is a president who won't proudly proclaim American exceptionalism, maybe the first president ever who truly doesn't believe in that."

even gone so far as to proclaim “I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being” (Obama, 2014b, para 42).

While this discussion of American exceptionalism has been at the center of the Obama presidency, its presence in American political discourse is nothing new. As previous scholarship has shown, American exceptionalism—specifically, the idea that America is a singular, superior, or even God-favored nation within the international system—has lived a long and vibrant life in American politics (see Coe & Neumann, 2011; Edwards, 2008; Edwards & Weiss, 2011; Gilmore, 2014; Gilmore, 2015; Hodgson, 2009; Ivie & Giner, 2009; Lipset, 1996; Lockhart, 2003; Madsen, 1998; Markovits & Hellerman, 2001; McEvoy-Levy, 2001; McCrisken, 2003; Pease, 2009; Saito, 2010; Shafer, 1991). Our study seeks to build on this research in three important ways. First, we assess the historical circumstances under which U.S. presidents have invoked American exceptionalism, focusing in particular on how the evolving status of the United States as a world power has shaped the extent to which this concept has been emphasized among U.S. presidents since the end of World War II. Second, we examine the impact of national crises—war or economic recession—on U.S. presidents’ propensity to invoke American exceptionalism in their public discourse. Third, we explore the unique circumstances and challenges that Obama has faced during his presidency and, in doing so, assess the degree to which these conditions may have influenced his emphasis on American exceptionalism in his public communications.

Through a content analysis of all major U.S. presidential addresses delivered in the United States since the end of World War II, we find that U.S. presidents have become increasingly more likely to invoke American exceptionalism, particularly after the end of the Cold War, and that in times of national crises, American exceptionalism becomes most

pronounced in U.S. presidential discourse. Moreover, we demonstrate the overwhelming propensity of President Obama, relative to his predecessors, to emphasize American exceptionalism in his public communications. The reason, we argue, has to do with the double-crisis nature of his presidency—two major wars and a recession—in addition to the racial bind that he has been forced to overcome throughout his presidency. We reflect on the implications of these findings for politicians, in particular minority candidates and elected officials, and the broader American public.

American Exceptionalism and Presidential Discourse

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 voters (Domke & Coe, 2010), garner public support for policies (Pease, 2009), and even inspire foreign populations to follow the United States' lead on a given issue (Hayden, 2011). 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 (Gilmore, 2014; Neumann and Coe, 2012). This may be due, at least in part, to the cultural relevance of these messages, which confirm widely held sentiments among the broader citizenry (Gamson, 1992; Gilmore, 2015; Snow & Benford, 1988). Take, for example, a 2010 Gallup poll, which found that 80 percent of U.S. adults agreed with the statement that the United States “has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world” (Gallup, 2010). Furthermore, 66 percent said that because of its exceptional status, the United States has “a special responsibility to be the leading nation in world affairs.” Indeed, American exceptionalism is a potent idea that transcends the ideological and partisan divides within the United States and serves to unite

Americans around one common identity. U.S. presidents are, therefore, strategically compelled to appeal to and embrace this notion in their public communications.

Previous research has documented three specific ways in which U.S. presidents have explicitly sought to characterize America as exceptional (Gilmore, 2014). First, in the most basic version, U.S. presidents might refer to the United States as a unique or *singular* country in world affairs, one which is fundamentally different from all others. From this point of view, the United States is one-of-a-kind and qualitatively different from all other countries in a number of distinct ways, from its history to its people to its form of government (Lipset, 1996; Madsen, 1998). Second, U.S. presidents might invoke American exceptionalism via explicit references to America as being *superior* to all other countries. Simply put, America is seen as better than all other countries—more virtuous, more powerful, more admired—and, thus, the “greatest country on earth.” Finally, U.S. presidents might invoke American exceptionalism by referring to the America as not only different, but *God-chosen* for the special role that it is expected to play in world affairs. In effect, the United States is exceptional because it has a divine responsibility in the international arena, a perspective that has deep roots in the country’s identity (Madsen, 1998). Together, these three types of invocations of American exceptionalism serve to leave no doubt among Americans that they are part of the world’s one truly exceptional nation.

American Exceptionalism Since WWII

The belief that America is a special place, one that has perhaps been chosen by God for a special role in world affairs, emerged even before the country’s inception. Madsen (1998) suggests that this idea came from those who left Great Britain to colonize what is now the United States. In essence, these colonists sought to build a “redeemer nation,” one that would “save the rest of the world from itself” (p. 2). Moreover, this idea had great appeal to America’s Founding

Fathers, including Thomas Jefferson, who in his first inaugural address (1801) emphasized that the United States was “the world’s best hope.” Nonetheless, scholars have argued that it was not until the beginning of the 20th Century that the United States’ status in world affairs was beginning to catch up to its “exceptional” reputation at home (Bacevich, 2008; McCrisken, 2003). Indeed, prior to the Second World War, the United States had grown into one of only a few elite powers within the international system, but it was not until after the war that the United States became a legitimate superpower. By not only emerging from the Second World War victorious, but also less decimated by the war than the other world powers, the United States had begun to solidify its “exceptional” status on the world stage (Bacevich, 2008). As President Harry Truman noted in his 1945 radio speech declaring U.S. victory in Japan: “Now let us set aside V-J Day as one of renewed consecration to the principles which have made us the *strongest nation on earth* and which, in this war, we have striven so mightily to preserve” (para. 20, emphasis added). Thus, the idea of American exceptionalism was beginning to become firmly entrenched within the collective consciousness of the American people. America had now become one of two global superpowers and there was reason to believe that this might have been due to the unique virtues, strength and promise of America.

We argue, however, that it was not until the end of the Cold War that U.S. presidents would be completely unfettered by the evolving global order and be able to invoke American exceptionalism to its fullest discursive potential. The United States had, after all, been mired in ongoing competition with the Soviet Union throughout much of the 20th century; thus, its exceptional status could still be clearly and legitimately contested. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, though, the United States no longer faced a global competitor that could challenge its supremacy on the world stage. As Krauthammer (1990)

famously noted, this was America's "unipolar moment." From this moment on, the idea of American exceptionalism seemed much clearer. In the words of Bacevich, "In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, few questioned that assumption. The status of the United States as the 'sole superpower' appeared unassailable" (2008, p. 2). With no apparent global competitors, the United States' supremacy in world affairs extended from military might and economic productivity to cultural influence and technological innovations. Thus, despite a long history of this idea within American culture, the end of the Cold War represented a fundamental shift in which American presidents could now support their assertion of exceptionalism with clear evidence of military, economic, and cultural strength and influence. This change, we argue, is likely to be reflected in American political discourse during this time. Specifically, we contend that U.S. presidents during the post-Cold War era will be much more likely than their Cold War predecessors to invoke American exceptionalism when addressing the American public. We therefore offer our first hypothesis:

H1: U.S. presidential invocations of American exceptionalism will increase significantly following the end of the Cold War.

American Exceptionalism in Times of National Crisis

Against this backdrop, we are also interested in exploring the differing circumstances—beyond the distribution of power within the international system—under which U.S. presidents might choose to invoke American exceptionalism more or less often. U.S. presidents routinely employ this concept in political speeches because of its power to engender unity and support among Americans (Gilmore, 2014; Neumann and Coe, 2012). It is likely, however, that there are specific circumstances in which the power of this idea might become more potent or more culturally resonant among Americans than at other times. In other words, there are times, we

argue, when U.S. presidents are likely to be more inclined to espouse American exceptionalism due to the political benefits that it might yield. On the surface, it would seem more likely for U.S. presidents to invoke American exceptionalism in times when the country is doing relatively well versus when it is not. In such situations, it seems intuitive that American exceptionalism would be most pronounced in presidential discourse because the “proof” of the country’s exalted status within the international system becomes more readily available. If the United States’ economy is booming, for example, or the United States is experiencing peace, it is to be expected that U.S. presidents might seek to highlight such national successes.

Nonetheless, it is our contention that it is *not* in moments when the United States’ is experiencing prosperity or peace that U.S. presidents are going to be more likely to invoke American exceptionalism; rather, we argue that emphasis on American exceptionalism will become more pronounced in moments of national uncertainty. Scholarship on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1986), for example, suggests that group-protective tendencies (in this case, protection of the national group) are most likely to arise when the group is perceived to be threatened in some way (Gilmore, Meeks, & Domke, 2013; Rowling, Gilmore, & Sheets, 2015; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008;). This process has been well-documented in research on news discourse, which has shown that journalists exhibit a propensity to bolster the national identity or engage in ethnocentric news coverage when the nation and/or national identity is perceived to be at risk (Entman, 1991; Wolfsfeld, Frosh, & Awadby, 2008; Hutcheson, Domke, Billeaudeau, & Garland, 2004; Rowling, Jones, & Sheets, 2011). Furthermore, scholarship suggests that politicians’ invocations of the nation itself also map onto public sentiment, and increase when the public’s confidence in the country is flagging (Sheets et. al., 2011). We argue that invocations of American exceptionalism—perhaps the most celebratory

discourse possible in terms of reaffirming the group's positive identity—serve to reassure the American public of the superior virtues and strength of the nation precisely when it is needed most—moments of national uncertainty.

There are two types of national crises that we believe are likely to elicit a more pronounced highlighting of American exceptionalism in U.S. presidential discourse—economic recession and war. As scholarship has shown, notions of American exceptionalism are crucial in times of economic recession (Hodgson, 2009). Specifically, this idea serves to reify the greatness of America in the minds of Americans and motivate them to continue to work in order to overcome the challenge. A second form of crisis—times of war—represents a different, perhaps more acute sort of threat to the nation. In such moments, American exceptionalism discourse should be more pronounced in presidential discourse because it is likely to encourage citizens to make sacrifices as well as express confidence that the United States will prevail in that conflict (Edwards 2008; McCrisken 2003). Put differently, in times of both peace and prosperity, relative to crisis, we expect U.S. presidents to be less motivated to invoke American exceptionalism. Thus, we offer our second hypothesis:

H2: U.S. presidents will be more likely to invoke American exceptionalism in times of national crisis—economic recession or war—than in times of prosperity and peace.

American Exceptionalism and the Obama Age

The Obama presidency offers a unique case in which to analyze the presence of American exceptionalism in presidential discourse. This stems from the unique circumstances and challenges that Obama has faced during his presidency. Consistent with our preceding argument, Obama has led the nation during a time marked by both severe economic recession *and* two major wars. This “double-crisis,” we suspect, is likely to lead to increased usage of

American exceptionalism by Obama in his public communications—in line with H2. It should be noted, however, that this is not the only instance in which a U.S. president has encountered such a dilemma; Presidents Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush all were faced with a similar double-crisis. Unlike these other presidents, however, we argue that Obama has faced an additional and, arguably, more potent challenge to his presidency, which further necessitated an emphasis on American exceptionalism in his public communications.

As noted above, Obama has suffered numerous attacks regarding his patriotism, his belief in American exceptionalism and his love for the United States since before his presidency began. Take, for example, the “Birther” movement that arose during the 2008 presidential campaign, which challenged Obama’s legitimacy as an American-born citizen and, in effect, called into question his capacity to feel patriotic about the nation (Crawford & Bhatia, 2012). In addition, Obama was met with substantial challenges to his patriotism throughout his campaign for such things as not having worn a flag pin on his lapel and for not saying “God bless America” at the end of every speech. Such attacks, however, increased exponentially after Obama took office. Obama, of course, did himself no favors on this front early on in his presidency when he responded to a British journalist’s question about whether he believed in American exceptionalism with the following: “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism” (2009, para. 38). As Edwards (2011b, 2014) has noted, this statement only served to reify the Republican belief that Obama was not a true believer in American exceptionalism and it became a rallying point for conservative criticisms of Obama (Edwards, 2011a). In particular, this

approach of humility and respect towards other nations was seen by many Republicans as weak, apologetic and, thus, an affront to their own sense of American exceptionalism.

Scholars and critics have come to consider many of these as implicit racial attacks (Daniel, 2008; Parks & Rachlinski, 2009-2010), capable of activating (sometimes unconscious) prejudice among American voters about the extent to which Whites are perceived as “more American” than non-Whites (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Devos & Ma, 2008; Devos, Ma & Gaffud, 2008). We have seen that throughout his presidency, including during his two presidential campaigns, Obama has sought to emphasize (and re-emphasize) his patriotism, his American-ness and his own personal embodiment of American exceptionalism (e.g. “In no other country on earth is my story even possible.”), ostensibly to combat these allegations of his being “less American” than his (White) opponents. We expect, therefore, that the combination of these factors—the post-Cold War period, the double-crisis timing of his presidency, plus the unique national identity-related attacks he has sustained as the first non-White president—should conspire to prompt Obama to invoke this reassuring, precious national idea more than ever before. Taken together, we offer our third hypothesis:

H3: President Barack Obama will invoke American exceptionalism significantly more often than each of his predecessors, including those who faced similar double-crises during their presidencies.

Methods

To examine these dynamics, a content analysis was employed to focus on invocations of American exceptionalism in major presidential speeches delivered to the American public. The dataset ($n = 343$) consisted of major presidential speeches delivered to the U.S. public beginning with Harry Truman’s first address to the nation after taking office in April of 1945 and ending

with President Barack Obama's speech in Selma, Alabama on the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Civil Rights March on March 7, 2015. All speeches were collected from the American Presidency Project, which is the most comprehensive publicly available archive of U.S. presidential public communications (Neumann & Coe, 2012).

Each text followed Domke and Coe's (2010) definition of a major presidential address: (1) the speech had to be delivered to the entire nation, (2) the speech had to be broadcasted live, and (3) the speech had to address serious national or international topics. This universe of speeches, therefore, included major addresses geared toward informing the American public about issues and events that were deemed important enough by the president to share with a national audience. In total, 343 domestic speeches, delivered by 12 U.S. presidents, were included in the dataset.

The same analytical framework was employed to analyze all of the speeches. The unit of analysis was the "invocation" of American exceptionalism, which was defined as any emphasis upon an American exceptionalism theme at any given time in a speech. To be specific, invocations were often fragments of sentences. For example, in "This is the greatest nation on earth," the phrase "greatest nation on earth" was coded as an invocation. The coding scheme was developed in earlier work (Gilmore, 2014) and included overt invocations of the United States as being *singular*, *superior*, or *God-favored*.

The *singular* exceptionalism invocations included any instance in which a president said America or its people, government, ideas, or founding principles were qualitatively different from the rest of the world. Specifically, invocations were coded as singular when presidents, in reference to the United States, employed terms and phrases such as different, unique, distinct, singular, only, first, and special. For example, after the September 2001 terrorist attacks, George

W. Bush (2002) posed the question: “Will America, with our unique position and power, blink in the face of terror” (para. 23).

Invocations were coded as *superior* when presidents said the United States or its components were more or better than any other country, or the best on earth, employing terms and phrases such as better, best, more, grander, greater, greatest, stronger, and more hard working. For example, the phrase “The United States is the greatest country on earth” was coded as *superior* exceptionalism.

Invocations were coded as *God-favored* when presidents declared the United States or its components as uniquely chosen or favored by a divine power. Notably, to be included in this category, invocations had to clearly state the United States was divinely connected in a way *unlike* any other country; invocations that referred to the United States simply as blessed were not sufficient. Thus the phrase “God bless America” was not coded as a form of God-favored exceptionalism. As an example of this category, Harry Truman (1949) said, “*Almighty God* has set before this Nation *the greatest task in the history of mankind*, and that He will give us the wisdom and the strength to carry it out” (para. 71).

To test our hypotheses, we also coded each speech for whether it took place in wartime or peacetime, and in times of economic recession or prosperity. For times of war we identified times in which the United States was engaged in an official inter-state war as defined by the Correlates of War Project at the University of Michigan. Furthermore, we consulted the National Bureau of Economic Research in order to determine the periods since 1945 that the United States was officially determined to be in economic recession. A recession, according to the NBER, is defined as a significant decline in economic activity, spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months.

To assess inter-coder reliability, two coders analyzed approximately 10 percent of the speeches ($n = 36$). There was a high level of agreement between the coders with a Krippendorff's alpha of .91 for all types of American exceptionalism invocations: *singular, superior, God-favored* (Neuendorf, 2002).

Results

American Exceptionalism in the Post-Cold War Era

Our first hypothesis focuses on whether there were any significant changes in U.S. presidential invocations of American exceptionalism following the end of the Cold War. To test this hypothesis we determined the percentage of speeches in which each U.S. president invoked American exceptionalism both during the Cold War and after. We also determined the average rate of invocation per speech. The findings are in Table 1.²

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The findings in Table 1 show clear support for our hypothesis: there was a marked, 17 point increase in U.S. presidential invocations of American exceptionalism between the entire Cold War (51% of speeches) and Post-Cold War (68%) periods. Additionally, not only did U.S. presidents more broadly highlight the idea of American exceptionalism after the end of the Cold War, but they relied on it more often in general across all speeches by an average of 2.32 times per speech versus 1.53 during the Cold War. In the second tier of the table, we sought to gain a more in-depth understanding of these dynamics. There are two important findings here. First, there was little difference in the frequency with which U.S. presidents highlighted American

² No inferential statistics were employed in this analysis because we examined the entire census of major presidential speeches since the end of World War II.

exceptionalism between the early and late Cold War periods.³ This suggests that perhaps the weight of the bipolar competition limited U.S. presidents from fully championing the idea of American exceptionalism. This finding supports our expectation that the shift in global world order following the Cold War would dramatically impact how U.S. presidents perceived and talked about their country. These distinctions, however, are not just found in the numbers. Take for example, President William Clinton's (1997) suggestion that after the fall of the Soviet Union, "America stands alone as the world's indispensable nation" (para. 6). That the United States holds a unique and special status unto the world was now incontrovertible.

Second, there was another marked increase in American exceptionalism invocations during the Post- 9/11 era, almost 20 points more than during the early and late Cold War periods, and a full 7 points more than in the early Post-Cold War era. This suggests that something other than changes in the distribution of power within the international system might explain the prevalence of American exceptionalism in U.S. presidential discourse. Specifically, 9/11 did not change the world order; nonetheless, the post-9/11 era has certainly been replete with overseas wars in addition to the Great Recession. Thus, this finding lends initial support to the idea that U.S. presidents are more likely to invoke American exceptionalism in times of national crises than in times of peace and prosperity. We examine these dynamics more thoroughly in the next section.

³ The Early Cold War lasted from 1945-1973. The late Cold War was from 1973-1991. We distinguish the two here because scholarship suggests that a fundamental shift occurred both in terms of how the United States conducted its foreign policy and, more importantly, how it perceived its place in the world following its defeat in Vietnam in 1973 (McCracken 2004). This was reflected, for example, in the book, *The Arrogance of Power*, by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman, J. William Fulbright (1967), in which he argued that America had become an imperialist state due to its cultural arrogance. Noted sociologist, Daniel Bell (1975), also published a piece entitled, "The End of American Exceptionalism" in which he proclaimed: "Today, the belief in American exceptionalism has vanished with the end of empire, the weakening of power, the loss of faith in the nation's future." With this in mind, we were interested in exploring whether any changes indeed took place regarding the prevalence of American exceptionalism in U.S. presidential discourse following the Vietnam War.

American Exceptionalism in Times of National Crisis

We expected that U.S. presidents would invoke American exceptionalism more often in times of crisis—be it economic recession or war, or both. To test this hypothesis, we determined the percentage of speeches in which each U.S. president invoked American exceptionalism in time of war, peace, recession, and economic prosperity. Broadly speaking, in times of war, presidents invoke American exceptionalism in 59% of speeches compared to 54% in times of peace. Similarly, they invoked this idea in 63% of speeches in times of recession and only 54% in times of prosperity. In addition, because these periods overlap, we charted a comparison between the four categories of war, peace, recession, and economic prosperity. These findings are in Table 2.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The findings in Table 2 lend substantial support for our hypothesis. Specifically, they show that U.S. presidents invoked American exceptionalism in between 8 and 15 percent more speeches when the country was facing some time of crisis or concern, relative to periods of peace and prosperity. Furthermore, overall we found that presidents also tended to invoke the idea of American exceptionalism more frequently per speech in times of national crisis, with one exception: in times of recession, but when the country is at peace, U.S. presidents invoked American exceptionalism much more broadly than in times of peace and prosperity (65% versus 50% of speeches), but slightly less often per speech (1.29 versus 1.67). Overall, however, these findings support our hypothesis that the belief that the United States is an exceptional country, one that—like no other—is capable of anything, is more frequently articulated when the country is in times of perceived crisis than when the country is enjoying apparent prosperity and stability. Take for example, at the height of the Great Recession in February of 2009, President Barack

Obama crafted his first ever speech before a joint session of Congress to address a single and urgent issue: the economy. He offered that, “The impact of this recession is real, and it is everywhere.” Obama quickly shifted, however, to a more optimistic tone. He spoke of the country’s innate ability to endure and recover from hard times because the American people are “the hardest working people on Earth.” Furthermore, he offered that, “Those qualities that have made America *the greatest force of progress and prosperity in human history*, we still possess in ample measure. What is required now is for this country to pull together, confront boldly the challenges we face, and take responsibility for our future once more” (para. 4). In short, America would overcome this adversity—as it had always done in the past—because it is unique, unmatched—in a word, *exceptional*.

American Exceptionalism in the Age of Obama

Finally, we expected that Obama would be substantially more likely than other presidents to invoke American exceptionalism when addressing the American public (H3). To test this hypothesis we determined the percentage of speeches in which each individual U.S. president has invoked American exceptionalism. These findings are in Table 3.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

The findings in Table 3 strongly support our hypothesis. Barack Obama has invoked American exceptionalism in a full 31 percent more speeches than the average of all other presidents combined since the end of World War II. Additionally, Obama invoked American exceptionalism between two and three times as often per speech as his fellow presidents combined (4.04 vs 1.55 per speech). These findings also support our previous hypothesis about the prevalence of this idea in U.S. presidential discourse in times of national crisis. Specifically, since taking office, Obama has overseen wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wars as well as what has

become known as the Great Recession of 2009. That said, the exaggerated differences we see in these results also support the notion that Barack Obama has had a unique relationship with American exceptionalism when compared to his contemporaries, even when accounting for the double-crisis (war and recession) status of much of his presidency. To examine these dynamics further, we compared Obama to each individual president dating back to 1945. The findings are in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The findings in Figure 1 are significant. Specifically, when looking at other presidents who faced similar double-crises, there is simply no comparison with Obama. For example, when compared to President Richard Nixon—Obama’s closest competitor who was in charge of managing a bloody and unpopular war in Vietnam coupled with two almost year-long recessions—Obama invoked American exceptionalism in 17 percent more speeches overall and 1.7 times more frequently across all speeches (4.04 invocations per speech versus 2.39). In comparison to fellow Post-Cold War and double-crisis president, George W. Bush, the distinctions are similarly stark. In particular, Obama has invoked American exceptionalism in 19% more speeches and 3.91 times more frequently across all speeches. Furthermore, when we compare Obama to the other presidents in less severe double-crises, the distinctions are even more dramatic: Obama invoked American exceptionalism in 40% more speeches and 5.05 times more often than Eisenhower and 37% and 2.78 times more than George H.W. Bush. The distinctions between Obama and all other presidents can also be seen outside of the numbers. Specifically, in the coding process, we discovered that President Obama is the first American president to ever explicitly employ the terminology “American exceptionalism” in any major political speech. For example, in response to his adversaries’ challenges to his patriotism, Obama

(2014b) offered, “A lot of people talk about American exceptionalism. I’m a firm believer in American exceptionalism” (para. 8).

Perhaps a stronger example, as previously mentioned, can be found in Obama’s (2014a) speech to graduating cadets in the U.S. Military Academy, when he asserted, “I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being” (para. 42). Obama has also employed the word “exceptional” to describe the United States four times as often as any other president. In short, Obama’s relationship with American exceptionalism has been both quantitatively and qualitatively different than his predecessors, regardless of the circumstances of their presidencies. These findings suggest that, in the face of such outright challenges to his patriotism and his belief in American exceptionalism, President Obama and his speechwriters have compensated—perhaps overcompensated—by making sure that American exceptionalism played a primary role in a grand majority of his speeches.

Discussion

This study represents the first systematic, longitudinal examination of how U.S. presidents have explicitly invoked the idea of American exceptionalism in their speeches to the American public since the end of World War II, focusing in particular on the political, economic, and historical circumstances under which U.S. presidents are more inclined to tap into this potent national idea. Our findings contribute to the growing body of scholarship on the manner and extent to which U.S. presidents have invoked this idea in political addresses (Gilmore, 2014; Neumann & Coe, 2012; Edwards, 2008; McCrisken, 2003; Pease, 2009) and illustrate how prevalent this idea has become in U.S. political discourse. In particular, our results demonstrate that the relevance and presence of American exceptionalism in presidential discourse has culminated during the age of Obama. Overall, our findings suggest that there are three major

factors at play that have made American exceptionalism so prevalent in American politics over time and, in particular, during the Obama presidency.

First, our findings support the notion that American exceptionalism has become an increasingly powerful and relevant concept in presidential speeches to the American public since the end of the Cold War. Specifically, our findings indicate that while many have suggested that the U.S. victory in World War II served as a *the* clear historical confirmation of an idea that had long lived in American history (See Madsen, 1998; Neumann & Coe, 2012)—that America was exceptional—it was actually not until the end of the Cold War when U.S. presidents seemed more free to systematically champion this idea (Bacevich, 2008; Edwards, 2008). Second, our findings contribute to a wider conversation about the contexts in which nation-reifying themes are strategically useful when addressing the American public (e.g. Hutcheson et al, 2004; Domke & Coe, 2010). Specifically, we found that U.S. presidents tend to rhetorically lean more heavily on the idea of American exceptionalism in times of national crisis than in times of relative national peace and prosperity—consistent with social identity theory’s perspective that it can be a form of group protectionism under threat (Entman, 1991; Gilmore et. al., 2013; Rowling et. al, 2015; Wolfsfeld et al., 2008). Third, our findings contribute new perspectives on the motivations behind President Barack Obama’s unique pattern of invocation of American exceptionalism and issues of patriotism in general. Specifically, Obama’s presidency represents not only the accumulation of the previous two factors—the post-Cold War period and a period of multiple, significant crises—but his own position as a frequent and particular target of attacks on his patriotism, love of America, and belief in American exceptionalism are likely impacting the exaggerated quantity and character of these invocations. These patterns were perhaps the most striking in our study, as they indicate that Obama has used this language at a rate that far

outpaces any of his predecessors, not to mention he was the first U.S. president to ever explicitly employ the terminology “American exceptionalism” in a major speech. This is all the more significant given that many of the attacks on Obama’s patriotism have focused specifically on his lack of invocation of American exceptionalism.

These findings raise several important questions for future research. First, why is it that regardless of how pervasively Obama invokes this idea, there remains an outright denial or fundamental lack of recognition of this empirical reality by his adversaries? In other words, how and why are Republicans able to get away with repeating this notion when the evidence so clearly speaks to the contrary? Furthermore, is it likely that future minority candidates (e.g., Hillary Clinton, Ben Carson, Carly Fiorina) might face similar challenges? To what extent does a candidate’s party affiliation impact this dynamic? Future research, therefore, should further examine the relationship between minority politicians and patriotism in the minds of Republicans and Democrats and how this manifests in political discourse. It is also important to further examine how politicians have employed American exceptionalism as a political weapon and the impact that these messages might have on Americans’ attitudes about a particular candidate, policy issue or event. This is particularly important to understand in light of the recent political attacks on immigrant and Muslim populations in U.S. public discourse.

Second, it is important to examine the broader implications of U.S. presidents exercising or enacting American exceptionalism in foreign affairs. Even though presidents do attempt to “translate” this concept when addressing foreign publics (Gilmore, 2014), American exceptionalism is inherently infused in both how U.S. presidents present their country to the world and how others view the United States in return. Indeed, few in the world are unaware of this widely held belief among Americans. Future research, therefore, should examine how these

rhetorical choices might impact attitudes and policies both within the United States and abroad. Do we see evidence, for example, that such messages impact the types of foreign policy preferences held among the American public and their leaders? More specifically, does continued exposure to this idea lead to greater support for interventionist versus isolationist views among the public? To what extent does partisanship impact this relationship? Furthermore, how do these messages impact public attitudes abroad or the policies of their governments when dealing with the United States? What impact might the rise of another “superpower” such as China play in either tampering or amplifying the use and embrace of this concept within America? Can a renewed bipolar or multipolar world, or simple perception thereof, change the way in which Americans view their own country in relation to others? Finally, might the increasingly interdependent nature of both economic and bellicose crises impact the extent and manner in which U.S. leaders espouse American exceptionalism both at home and abroad moving forward? These are all critical questions worthy of future scholarly examination.

We should also mention that there are a couple of limitations to our study. First, it should be noted that these findings only speak to presidential speeches, which, by nature, seek to paint an exaggeratedly positive view of the country itself. In fact, in the analysis, it was a rare occasion that a president would suggest that the country was anything but exceptional. That said, there has been a growing presence of journalists, academics, politicians, and pundits who have actively questioned the idea of American exceptionalism. Studies have shown that such critical perspectives can evoke very negative responses in some citizens (Gilmore et. al, 2013). Future studies, therefore, should examine the impact that these challenges can have on the American psyche as their resonance among the American people is not quite as clear. Second, our analysis did not focus on any partisan distinctions in the invocation of American exceptionalism and,

while there was virtually no difference in how often Republican (55%) versus Democratic (56%) presidents invoked the idea of American exceptionalism in their public communications, it is possible that there are qualitative differences that might set them apart. Future research, therefore, should examine how partisanship might impact the types of American exceptionalism (singular, superior, God-chosen) that presidents choose to invoke in their public speeches. For instance, are Republicans more likely to invoke a more spiritual (i.e., God-chosen) form of American exceptionalism and Democrats a more diplomatic (i.e., singular) form? Furthermore, research should examine to whether partisanship might impact a president's likelihood of relating American exceptionalism to issues such as the country's military might and economic power or to ideas like humanitarianism and diplomacy.

Overall, this study has shown that even though the idea of American exceptionalism has lived a long and vibrant life in U.S. political discourse, its prevalence and political appeal has culminated under the Obama presidency. Given the fact that American exceptionalism has become an increasingly contentious subject in contemporary American discourse, it is imperative that we begin explore and better understand the impact that these messages have on the way that Americans perceive their country in relation to the rest of the world and the policies—both domestic and foreign—that they support. Given the fact that many Americans increasingly embrace the idea that America is unique, superior and perhaps God-favored within the international system, its potency in U.S. political discourse cannot be underestimated.

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Tables

Table 1. American Exceptionalism Invocations in Domestic Speeches by Political Eras, 1945 to 2015.

	Cold War (n=248)		Post Cold War (n=95)	
Percentage of speeches with invocation	51%		68%	
Invocations per speech	1.53		2.32	
	Early Cold War (n=144)	Late Cold War (n=104)	Post Cold War (n=37)	Post 9/11 (n=58)
Percentage of speeches with invocation	51%	52%	64%	71%
Invocations per speech	1.56	1.49	2.53	2.28

Table 2. American Exceptionalism Invocations in Domestic Speeches by Combined Times of National Crisis, 1945 to 2015.

	Peacetime	War
Recession	65% (1.29)	58% (1.79)
Prosperity	50% (1.69)	60% (2.10)

% of speeches with invocations present, () invocations per speech

Table 3. American Exceptionalism Invocations in Domestic Speeches Comparing Obama with All Other Presidents, 1945 to 2015.

	Harry Truman to George W Bush (n=319)	Barack Obama (n=24)
American exceptionalism	On average	
Percentage of speeches with invocation	52%	83%
Invocations per speech	1.55	4.04

Figure 1. American Exceptionalism Invocations in Domestic Speeches by U.S. President, 1945 to 2015.

