

## Donald Trump's calls to "Make America great again" show that American Exceptionalism is still a powerful idea.

*In his calls to "Make America great again" Donald Trump is making both a threat and a promise. What it signifies more fundamentally, however, is that Donald Trump understands how important American exceptionalism is in US electoral politics. **Hilde Restad** gives an overview of the history and role of the idea of American exceptionalism in US politics. She writes that despite concerns over its end during the 1970s and 2000s, American exceptionalism never really went away, something which was proven by conservatives' doubts about President Obama's stated belief in the ideology.*



According to the Republican presidential frontrunner Donald Trump, "we're not a strong country anymore." It is a little unclear what Trump means by this, but it seems to be connected to purportedly leaky borders as well as a loss of American stature around the world. The solution to this malaise is electing Trump to the White House, because "we will have so much winning if I get elected, that you may get bored with winning." In other words, if you want America to be exceptional again, definitely vote Trump.

This is all entirely unfair to Florida Senator Marco Rubio, who was supposed to be the candidate of American exceptionalism in this election cycle. Rubio, apparently not having read the times correctly, started his campaign for president with a traditional, optimistic Ronald Reagan-esque formulation of American exceptionalism. Foreign observers were probably confused, he offered, by the fact that the son of an immigrant bartender could run for president (apparently, Rubio is not familiar with Nicolas Sarkozy, although granted; Sarkozy's father was a Hungarian aristocrat, not a Cuban bartender). But Rubio was simply trying to repay his debt to the greatest country on earth, he said. Rubio talked about a "new American century" for a while, but in the last weeks of 2015, he changed his tone dramatically. As Trump's rise in the polls continued, Rubio's brand of exceptionalism turned negative, warning potential voters of how a weakened America will be attacked by terrorists Obama has released from the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

### What is American exceptionalism?

American exceptionalism has always been important in American politics, but the concept itself became significant in US electoral politics as of 2008. We will get back to that, but before we ask 'why', we should ask 'what'.

While touted by virtually all US politicians as an objective fact that can be verified by comparing the United States to other countries, American exceptionalism is better thought of as an idea. In fact, there are three ideas, each representing a different aspect of the perceived historic exceptionalism of the United States.

First is the idea that the United States is distinct from the "Old World." This used to mean Europe but today simply refers to the rest of the world. The significance of seeing the United States as "distinct" is not that it denotes the United States as *different* from the rest of the world; it definitely means *better*. This belief in US distinction is powerful, persistent, and pervasive and as alive today as it was in early US history. In 2010, Gallup reported that a huge majority of Americans (80 percent) agreed with the statement "the United States has a unique character because of its history and Constitution that sets it apart from other nations as the greatest in the world." The fact that US polling bureaus regularly ask their citizens such questions speaks volumes about the pervasive belief in American exceptionalism (and the constant fear that it is dwindling).

Second, American exceptionalism – it is believed by most Americans – endows the United States with a unique role

to play in world history. The special mission bequeathed upon the United States means it should be a *leader* of nations. This idea of leadership is often prominent in presidential rhetoric. In fact, in a quantitative study of presidential State of the Union speeches from Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush (between 1934 and 2008), Rico Neumann and Kevin Coe [found](#) only three instances of US presidents holding up foreign countries as exemplars for the United States. Of nearly 2,500 mentions of other nations, only Britain's persistence in the fight against Nazi Germany (FDR, 1942); Sweden's health care system (John F. Kennedy, 1963); and Japan's educational system (Ronald Reagan, 1983) were worthy of mention as examples for the United States to follow.

The third and last idea is that the United States shall – as the only nation in history – thwart the laws of history by rising to power but never decline. The proof of this is in the superior American pudding. First, the United States won over the most powerful empire of its time (Great Britain); then, it successfully conquered a continent; furthermore it expanded across the oceans – thwarting yet another powerful empire (Spain); and finally won two world wars over Germany that allowed it to establish an international order over which it still rules. With the end of the Cold War, American exceptionalism was vindicated seemingly for all eternity: The United States had proven itself to be that special nation that shall lead all other nations toward the “end of history,” in Francis Fukuyama's words.

What matters in all three parts of the above definition is that Americans have, throughout their history, *believed* they are a superior people, *believed* they are endowed with a unique mission, *believed* that they will never succumb to the merciless laws of history. Most importantly, it's an idea that Americans and their leaders have often [acted upon in the world](#).



*Credit: John Menard (Flickr, CC-BY-SA-2.0)*

### **The end of American exceptionalism?**

Both Trump and (belatedly) Rubio are correct in assuming that Americans feel unsure about the greatness of the country at the current moment. Indeed, a few times in American history, the otherwise strong belief in exceptionalism has been shaken. Interestingly, the debate surrounding the possible “end of American exceptionalism” seems to correlate with prospects of relative US decline. The United States has, since its ascendancy to super- and now hyper power at least twice undergone an existential crisis.

The first of these came in the troubled decade of the 1970s. With the relative economic decline vis-à-vis Japan and the European Economic Community as well as the Soviet Union achieving relative nuclear parity with the United

States, the United States seemed to be losing the Cold War. This set of upsetting facts was made worse by a series of domestic scandals. In the wake of the largely failed and highly controversial Vietnam War came Watergate which ultimately led to the resignation of President Nixon in disgrace, adding insult to an already injured American body politic. In 1975, sociologist Daniel Bell wrote a *National Affairs* essay, “[The End of American Exceptionalism](#),” questioning the validity of American exceptionalism in light of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. “Today,” Bell wrote, “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.”

When President Barack Obama entered the White House in January 2009, he was taking over at a time of national distress much like the mid-1970s. The financial crisis that began in 2007-2008 was the most severe the country had experienced since the Great Depression. To make matters worse, the war on terror was seemingly a failure, unable, as it was to bring Osama Bin Laden to justice or deliver freedom and democracy – as the invasions apparently were [supposed to do](#) – to either Iraq or Afghanistan. It was a time of national humility – the diplomatic hangover after the halcyon days of the latest exceptional mission to save the world.

In fact, in 2011 the Pew Research Center [reported](#) that for the first time since 2002 only about half of US respondents agreed with the statement “Our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others.” Perhaps this time, the end of American exceptionalism really was here?

### **American exceptionalism never really went away**

But wait. What happened after the 1970s? While faith in American exceptionalism wavered in the 1970s, the belief in exceptionalism came roaring back with Ronald Reagan’s “shining city on a hill” in the 1980s. The United States went from national tragedies, oil shocks and hostages in Iran to – in the American exceptionalist narrative – “winning” the Cold War. “By the grace of God,” the United States had “won the Cold War,” President George H. W. Bush [said](#) in his State of the Union speech in 1992.

And indeed, while the 2012 Pew poll was reported in US media with much [lament](#), a salient fact was missed: Of the nations polled, the United States still polled highest in belief in cultural superiority (and that’s just “cultural” superiority). Indeed, once the US economy picks up enough speed, Americans will probably yet another time regain faith in the superiority of their country.

This means that trying to be the candidate that successfully taps into a shaken faith in American exceptionalism is a tricky task. Indeed, the Republican nominee for president in the last election cycle, Mitt Romney, tried this exact thing without any luck. In 2012, questioning President Barack Obama’s belief in American exceptionalism became a prioritized campaign strategy. Writing in his book [No Apology. The Case for American Greatness](#), that President Obama had toured the world “apologizing for America” in his first term, Romney promised to assert and promote American exceptionalism were he to be elected president. “America must lead the world, or someone else will,” Romney [said](#) during the campaign. This is, of course, literally true. But this assertion expressed something deeper, found in the ideas inherent in a belief in American exceptionalism.

But President Obama answered in kind, upping the American exceptionalism-ante. In his second [Inaugural](#) speech in January 2013, Obama said:

*What makes us exceptional — what makes us American — is our allegiance to an idea articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’*

Obama ended the speech by rallying his fellow citizens to the mission upon which the country was founded: “With

common effort and common purpose, with passion and dedication, let us answer the call of history and carry into an uncertain future that precious light of freedom.”

### **Don't Stop Believin'**

Despite Obama's frequent references to American exceptionalism, his true belief is continuously doubted not just by conservatives, but also more generally by the US population, which is why Romney thought his strategy would work. Responding to Obama's [Second Inaugural](#) the conservative magazine the *American Thinker* wrote that whereas Obama had now made it clear he thought the United States is exceptional, this was merely a sign of “diagnosable narcissism” as the reason for his conversion was his own reelection – Obama thought “America is exceptional because it elected Barack Obama,” they [stated](#).

Maybe Obama is a diagnosable narcissist. (But hey, have they met Trump?) Or maybe Obama is just saying what he thinks the American public needs to hear. But if that's true, isn't that interesting? Why – were this in fact what President Obama is doing – does the president think this is important to do? Why is it so important for Americans to hear that the United States is exceptional? Because American exceptionalism is, essentially, the American national identity.

Chiding what he calls the “vanity” of American exceptionalism, Richard Gamble [quotes](#) the inimitable Alexis de Tocqueville: “In their relations with foreigners,” [Tocqueville] sighed, “Americans seem irritated by the slightest criticism and appear greedy for praise. The flimsiest compliment pleases them and the most fulsome rarely manages to satisfy them; they plague you constantly to make you praise them and, if you show yourself reluctant, they praise themselves. Doubting their own worth, they could be said to need a constant illustration of it before their eyes. Their vanity is not only greedy, it is also restless and jealous.”

Many nations are proud of their countries, but some a bit more than others, is perhaps what Tocqueville was saying. In 2006 the [study](#) “National Pride in Comparative Perspective” found that Americans, along with Venezuelans, topped the international rankings. The beauty of American exceptionalism being an idea is that as long as people believe in it, it will be true. It is that all-encompassing wisdom found in the eternal lyrics of the rock band *Journey*: “Don't stop believin'.” If, on the other hand, Americans stop believing in their nation's exceptionalism, it will cease to be true. This is why the thought of an American president *not* believing is such an upsetting prospect for so many American political analysts and commentators.

For Americans, it is a truism that the United States is the world's best hope for peace and prosperity. This simple idea can be seen acted out in various parts of American history – a civilizing mission toward Native Americans, a “manifest destiny” to reach the Pacific Ocean, as the leader of the free world, or in a crusade against terrorism – but underlying them all is the belief in American exceptionalism. There is nothing exceptional about this, of course. “There is not a civilized nation which does not talk about its civilizing mission just as grandly as we do,” Yale sociologist William Graham Sumner remarked in 1899 after the imperial war against Spain in 1898 (which, by the way, landed the US the Philippines as a *colony*). “Now each nation laughs at all the others when it observes these manifestations of national vanity. You may rely upon it that they are all ridiculous by virtue of these pretensions, including ourselves.”

In other words, throughout history, great nations have conceived of themselves as superior and as endowed with a mission to dominate other peoples and/or to lead the rest of the world (the two seem to go together). Examples abound, from the Ottoman Turks, to nineteenth century Russia, to imperial Great Britain and France's *mission civilisatrice*.

So while it's not exceptional to think one is exceptional, it has proven to be a powerful idea in US history with important consequences for national identity, foreign policy and now electoral politics. And that makes it a very important concept to get right.

Want to know more? Read the author's book, upon which this post is based: [American Exceptionalism: An idea that made a nation and remade the world](#) (Routledge, 2014).

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.*

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