

**Reverting to Form
American Exceptionalism and Human Rights in the Age of Terror**

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a model of American international policy based in providential exceptionalism. Providential exceptionalism is a belief in America's special role as a chosen nation burdened with perfecting and defending liberty and democracy. The model developed here shows how providential exceptionalism works as a cognitive filter and frame, shaping Americans' perceptions about international events and conditioning American policy responses. The model anticipates a messianic style of engagement in times of grave threat and isolationist tendencies in more normal circumstances; it also generates hypotheses about the style of these policy orientations. This model is tested against the historical record and used to explain two puzzles: America's paradoxical leadership role on international human rights and the new direction in its international policy after 9/11. Providential exceptionalism demystifies America's leadership role and makes clear that, since 9/11, international policy and human rights policy in particular have undergone a reversion to form.

There is a widespread view today that American international policy, especially in the arena of human rights, has changed dramatically in the wake of 9/11. Scholars and commentators disagree about the reasons for this change, citing imperial arrogance (Boggs 2004; Judis 2003; Panitch 2003), the burdens of growing American hegemony (Ignatieff 2003; Kagan 2002), and the influence of religious conservatives (e.g., Boyer 2004; Oldfield 2004; Zunes 2004) and neoconservatives (e.g., Boyle 2004; Boot 2004) in the G.W. Bush administration, among other factors. Without denying their explanatory power with respect to particular policies, I maintain that these factors obscure a more profound transformation: American international policy after 9/11 is reverting to form. It is consistent, both generally and in respect of human rights, with the policies and practices of the Cold War. Moreover, this post-9/11 change signals ongoing continuity

with a broader pattern of reactions and responses to international events throughout the country's history. I shall try to demonstrate this recent reversion and to explain the larger historical pattern, including the paradox of America's leadership and laggardness in international human rights, into which it fits.

To achieve these aims, this essay joins the long-simmering debate on American exceptionalism, which has again come to a boil as the present administration turns up the heat in its "war on terror."² American policies since 9/11 have prompted critics and supporters of the administration to invoke American exceptionalism, underlining this contested concept's famously plastic nature. I develop a precise and rigorous account of one form of American exceptionalism, which I call *providential* exceptionalism, and use it to derive a model for understanding American international policy in historical perspective. Providential exceptionalism works as a cognitive schema, a filter and frame, conditioning Americans' reactions and responses to external events and the international environment. The expectations for the style and orientation of American international policy generated by providential exceptionalism track well with historical trends and explain both the paradox of American leadership on human rights and the post-9/11 change in American policy. The essay thus resolves the two related puzzles about human rights, situating both within a broad theoretical interpretation of American international policy that itself contributes to our understanding of American exceptionalism.

The essay has seven sections. The first presents a brief analytic treatment of American exceptionalism, clarifying the meaning of this ambiguous and highly contested concept. The second fleshes out what I am calling *providential* exceptionalism, the belief in America as a chosen nation blessed by God and burdened with the special mission or

errand of perfecting liberty and democracy. The third section offers a model of providential exceptionalism as a cognitive schema, a filter that shapes Americans' perceptions of international events and the international environment and as a frame for the policy responses engendered by these perceptions. The model generates expectations about the style and orientation of American international policy, which in the fourth section I test against the historical record. Providential exceptionalism provides a useful theoretical account for understanding American international policy. In the fifth section I consider the crucial period between the fall of Communism in 1989 and the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, showing that the confusion about America's role in the world results from the contradictory implications of growing interdependence and the absence of a clear and immediate threat to American interests and security. In the final two sections I address the two human rights puzzles with which I began, showing in the sixth how my theoretical framework developed here sheds light on America's leadership role on international human rights. Providential exceptionalism consistently and coherently accounts for this paradoxical position across a range of dimensions. Finally, in the seventh section, I show how 9/11 wrenched America back into its familiar style of international engagement, demonstrating telling consistencies between contemporary and Cold War policy. A brief conclusion limns three broader implications of the argument.

Varieties of Exceptionalism

When I discussed this paper with a colleague from my former university, he told me about a study group on American exceptionalism that had formed on campus. The group met only a few times before disbanding; apparently its members could not agree on what

American exceptionalism was or even whether it existed. The group's fate nicely illustrates the contested and contentious nature of American exceptionalism; the concept means different things to many people – including, to some, nothing at all. It has been used promiscuously of late, littering mainstream magazines and newspaper op-ed pages as well as scholarly books and journals. It is invoked to praise or blame a range of policies, including the administration's human rights policy, its doctrine of preemption, and its wider war on terror.

One of the difficulties in any discussion of American exceptionalism is the ambiguity surrounding the concept itself, ambiguity illustrated by these varied uses of it. Much of the disagreement about American exceptionalism, though hardly all, originates in the different understandings of it invoked by scholars and commentators. I want to distinguish among three different exceptionalist theses, theses that, despite some overlap, are reasonably distinct and have quite distinctive implications. I shall refer to these theses as *historical* exceptionalism, *behavioral* exceptionalism, and *providential* exceptionalism. *Historical* exceptionalism refers to claims about America's unique historical origins and development. It is primarily associated with arguments about the absence of socialism in America, arguments citing the lack of a feudal past, abundant land, diversity among the working classes owing to immigration, and a variety of other factors (e.g., Lipset 1996). More generally, historical exceptionalism looks to the constellation of facts and attributes that mark what Tocqueville, who first referred to America as exceptional, called the "point of departure," for explanations of differences between America and the rest of the world (Europe; Tocqueville 2000). Shafer (1991) writes in the preface to a recent edited volume that, "American exceptionalism,

summarized, is the notion that the United States was created differently, developed differently, and thus has to be *understood* differently – essentially on its own terms and within its own context.” Numerous analytic difficulties beset scholarly efforts to assess America’s historical exceptionalism (see Shafer 1999). There is also a logical problem: it does not follow that a country with distinctive historical origins and trajectories poses epistemological problems different from those attending comparative studies generally. But once the claim about special epistemological treatment evaporates, historical exceptionalism reduces to the rather trivial claim that different nations have different pasts and that these pasts matter for our understanding of those nations. The claim is trivial because practically no one disagrees. Besides, there is nothing distinctively American about it: some scholars, noticing this point, have called for “comparative exceptionalism” as a historical approach (Kammen 1993).

A second claim found frequently in the literature refers to *behavioral* exceptionalism, the thesis that America’s actions, policies, and endeavors in international affairs are unique or distinctive. Behavioral exceptionalism is an empirical hypothesis, and in this respect it often overlaps with the historical thesis just described. Michael Ignatieff identifies three types of exceptionalist behavior in the arena of human rights (though these types of behavior might apply more generally). *Exemptionalism* refers to the American habit of negotiating multilateral agreements and regimes only if they allow exemptions for American citizens and practices; of attaching reservations to treaties and conventions; of delaying or refusing to ratify conventions at all; and, of refusing to provide for the implementation of those agreements it does sign and ratify in domestic law (Ignatieff forthcoming). *Double standards* refers to America’s habit “of [judging]

itself by different standards than it uses to judge other countries and [judging] its friends by standards different than those it uses for its enemies” (Ignatieff forthcoming). Finally, *legal isolationism* describes the attitudes of American courts towards human rights standards and jurisprudence of other countries and of the international community (Ignatieff forthcoming; cf. Koh 2003; Ignatieff 2002). Each of these claims concerns how US policies and actions are unique or different from those of other countries. Strangely, while behavioral exceptionalism is mainly a family of empirical claims, most of them have gone untested; when subjected to scrutiny, as in one exploratory study by Lepgold and McKeown (1995) little support is found for exceptionalist hypotheses, and it is difficult to theorize how *American* behavioral exceptionalism should differ from *hegemonic* behavioral exceptionalism.

Finally, a third variant of the exceptionalist thesis is *providential* exceptionalism. Providential exceptionalism (PE) refers to a commonplace American belief, feeling, or awareness that theirs is a chosen nation, one upon which Providence has bestowed special blessings and which has been charged with a special world-historical mission to cultivate and promote its values. It is with this type of exceptionalism, or one version of it, that I shall be concerned here. PE is frequently conflated with both of the other kinds of exceptionalism. It has an obvious historical dimension: originating with the earliest British settlers in North America, its evolution can be traced through several centuries of American religious and later political rhetoric. Despite this historical aspect, PE is not a claim about how things are or about how they were; it is a claim about how Americans have thought about how things are and were. If, as (Kammen 1993) suggests, every country is different, America’s difference might consist in this distinctive belief in its

own difference; such a belief is itself a crucial fact of American history (Howe, cited in (Kammen 1993, 27-8). PE also makes behavioral claims, but these claims concern the reasons animating American actions and attitudes rather than their uniqueness. I am interested in how America's self-understanding as a chosen nation – a “city upon a hill” in Winthrop's famous phrase – influences its perceptions of and behavior in the world.

Providential Exceptionalism

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

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

America was to be a “redeemer nation” that would quite literally save England from its corruption by imparting to it a pure form of Church polity. The colonists' separation from the domineering Stuart monarchy and hostile Anglican clergy provided

the physical and spiritual distance necessary for developing this polity, which would be transported to and implemented in England when conditions permitted (Miller 1956b, 11-12; cf. Madsen 1998). From Winthrop's famous shipboard speech through the election sermons preached in the wilds of New England, Miller demonstrates that this first generation understood its "errand" in these redemptive, forthrightly political terms. Of course, the experiment might go wrong: as Winthrop reminded his brethren on board the *Arabella*, a city on a hill is visible to all, but it can serve either as beacon or as warning. The possibility of failure weighed heavily on the Puritans, especially after seemingly propitious developments in England after 1647 took a profoundly discouraging turn: Cromwell, in an effort to sure up his wobbly political coalition, opted for general toleration rather than rule of the saints. With the prospect of reform in England thus destroyed, the errand lost its immediacy, leaving subsequent generations to struggle with its enduring significance (Miller 1956b, 13-15).

There seems little point in multiplying examples of speeches and sermons dedicated to the theme of this Puritan errand; they are familiar and ubiquitous. Two points deserve special emphasis, however, in light of my broader purpose here. The first is that, contrary to common perceptions depicting Virginia "cavaliers" as the opposites of their rigidly Calvinistic New England cousins, both branches of the family shared a providential understanding of their purpose in America. If the divine purpose of the Virginia Company remains mysterious to us modern observers – for whom its avowedly commercial nature and reliance upon slavery seem like dubious qualities in a holy endeavor – it was perfectly clear to the Virginians (Miller 1956b, 99-140). They too understood themselves as "a peculiar people, marked as chosen by the hand of God"

(John Rolfe, cited in (Bellah 1975, 40) The founders of Jamestown were convinced of the harmony of their evangelical and entrepreneurial missions. “When the English undertook to plant colonies in America, they commenced – whatever they ended with – not with propositions about the rights of man or the gospel of wealth, but with absolute certainties concerning the providence of God” (Miller 1956b, 115). Recovering this fact about the founding of Virginia is important because it dispels a common misperception about the reach and influence of Puritanism in colonial North America and establishes the broad foundations of providentialism.

The second point to emphasize is that the Puritans held a rather strange (to us) view of liberty, one linked directly to their understanding of covenant. The subtleties of this complex doctrine, which arose in response to the Arminian heresy, lie beyond the scope of this essay, but a brief sketch reveals how PE influences American thinking about freedom. Calvinist theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were struggling to explain why people should strive for salvation or regulate their behavior when God, in his wise but inscrutable way, preordains salvation for the elect and perdition for everyone else. The trick was to show why people ought to be good while nonetheless preserving inviolate God’s absolute sovereignty with respect to salvation, to show people persuaded of justification by grace why “complete disregard of moral performance” was unacceptable (Miller 1956b, 89). The rather ingenious solution was the “covenant of grace.” Simplifying madly: God made a covenant with Adam, and later with Noah and his sons, promising salvation if they had faith and strived to follow the law. God voluntarily submits to this binding agreement, making the terms and requirements of salvation plain, but His reasons for doing so remain beyond mortal ken. Humans must

endeavor to live up to those requirements, to uphold their side of the bargain. Of course, that God might grant or withhold the wherewithal required to keep the covenant means that the behavioral conundrum is not fully resolved, but at least on this version out piety and successes indicate something about His otherwise mysterious intentions and soothes the anxious.

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

fulfill God's larger purposes (see Miller 1956a, 121-43). Still, this "rationalist" innovation transformed election of magistrates from an affirmation into a genuine choice, helping to harmonize Calvinist tenets with Enlightenment principles.

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

This is not to say that PE provides any guarantee of the infallibility of the popular will. On the contrary, collective failures to use freedom wisely, to carry out the providential errand, call down divine wrath which, much like parental punishments, reaffirm God's love and plan even as they demonstrate his immediate displeasure. As (Madsen 1998, 25) observes, this theme finds expression in a literary genre of "captivity narratives," in which colonists kidnapped by Indians but subsequently reunited with their

European communities interpreted their experiences as metaphors for the communities' sins. Mary (Rowlandson 1682) wrote in a characteristic passage that

I can but stand in admiration to see the wonderful power of God in providing for such a vast number of our enemies in the wilderness, where there was nothing to be seen, but from hand to mouth. Many times in a morning, the generality of them would eat up all they had, and yet have some further supply against they wanted. It is said, "Oh, that my People had hearkened to me, and Israel had walked in my ways, I should soon have subdued their Enemies, and turned my hand against their Adversaries" (Psalm 81.13-14). But now our perverse and evil carriages in the sight of the Lord, have so offended Him, that instead of turning His hand against them, the Lord feeds and nourishes them up to be a scourge to the whole land.

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

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

This rationale was reiterated by many leading figures in the struggle for independence. John Adams wrote that "I always consider the settlement of America as

the opening of a grand scheme and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth” (cited in Bellah 1975, 33). This world historical importance made the American experiment’s success vital: as Samuel Williams put it, “in our destruction liberty itself expires and human nature will despair of evermore regaining its first and original dignity” (cited in Bailyn 1992, 140). George Washington felt that nothing less than “the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered... [as] staked on the experiment intrusted [sic] to the hand of the American people” (cited in Bellah 1975, 33-4). As Bailyn (1992, 140) concludes, “this theme, elaborately orchestrated by the colonial writers, marked the fulfillment of the ancient idea, deeply embedded in the colonists’ awareness, that America had from the start been destined to play a special role in history” (cf. Ross 1995, 22); that role was to nurture and defend liberty and democracy and promote their diffusion across the globe.

In the nineteenth century, this American errand was translated into the ideology of manifest destiny (Madsen 1998, 89ff.). Herman Melville, himself skeptical of America’s direction, wrote that “we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world” (cited in Bellah 1975, 38); cf. (Madsen 1998, 81). John O’Sullivan (1839) argued that “the far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High – the Sacred and the True.” Rabbi Isaac Wise’s speech honoring Washington and his compatriots as “the chosen instruments in the hands of Providence, to turn the

wheel of events in favor of liberty forever...” makes the transition from chosen people on a noble errand to manifest destiny apparent. Rabbi Wise argues that “nothing can arrest our progress, nothing drag our country down from her high place in history, except our own wickedness working a willful desertion of our destiny, the desertion from the ideal of liberty” (Bellah 1975, 41). This speech shows how easily the idea of a special role in securing liberty slides over into an entitlement to “progress” and a “destiny” of expanding liberty. It also shows the enduring strength of the idea that only deviation from the path of Providence, only abuse of liberty, can displace America from its special historical role. Finally, it illustrates that PE, while rooted in a particular Puritan understanding, had become a secular (or at least ecumenical) national belief. That belief finds expression in the words of Walt Whitman, whose celebration of America as “a great test or trial case for all the promises and speculations of humanity and of the past and present” exudes the boundless confidence, optimism, and exceptionalism that characterized the national creed in the nineteenth century (cited in Bellah 1975, 139).

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

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His

appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

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

Before considering PE's implications for international policy, I want to clarify that it is not a claim about Americans' religious views. PE develops from the Puritan understanding of a divine errand, but becomes less explicitly religious with time (although it is undeniable and unnecessary to deny that for many Americans PE retains much of its original theological flavor). Nor is PE an ideology; that term denotes a conscious, comprehensive political doctrine. PE is better described as a "para-ideology" or "collective belief system" (McEvoy-Levy 2001, 5ff.). It is more diffuse, less doctrinaire, and less systematic than ideology, a distinctive and commonplace belief among Americans that the United States is a special country with a special historical role to play in the drama of liberty and democracy. This belief is widespread if not always

conscious; its familiarity in American political rhetoric both reflects and reinforces its pervasive reach across the political spectrum. Showing that Americans differ widely in their religious beliefs or political ideologies would not count as evidence against my argument. The PE thesis cannot be refuted, or even really assessed, on the grounds of its truth or veracity: it is not a claim about whether America really *does* have a special role but rather a claim about Americans' attitudes about the idea of such a role. PE *could* be falsified by showing that most Americans do not hold that their country has a special role in securing liberty and democracy for the world; while survey data on this point are incomplete and open to conflicting interpretations, the evidence suggests that large majorities of Americans do believe their country has a "special role" to play in the world.³ This seems consistent with my main claim here: that PE is a diffuse but widespread belief in a distinctly American providential errand, a special role in perfecting and promoting liberty and democracy. America is an example to the world, a model to be emulated, and one whose success is crucial to freedom's very survival.

Providential Exceptionalism and American International Policy

In this section I turn from the substance of PE to consideration of how it works as a cognitive filter and frame. I develop a model that illustrates how PE shapes American reactions to international events and the international environment and informs American policy responses to them. Next, I work out expectations for the style and orientation of American international policy derived from PE, expectations I compare with the historical record in later sections. My aim is to develop a theoretical framework that helps to explain broad trends in American international policy. Let me stress again that

in developing this framework I conceive PE as a para-ideology and treat it as a social fact; I take no position on whether America actually has the role PE ascribes to it. I am interested in how the belief in America's special role might condition American international policy. The following hypotheses are claims about what we would expect American actions and policies to be *given* PE, not claims about whether those actions and policies are good or bad, desirable or unfortunate, sensible or irrational.

The model developed here is an heuristic device, one intended less to explain in any strict causal sense than to illuminate, to facilitate our understanding. In a brilliant essay on the "American Style" in foreign policy decision-making, Stanley Hoffmann (1968, 362) defended his own heuristic model as "a postulate and a construct. It attempts to establish order in a chaotic mass of features by positing that a nation perceives the world, and its place in it, in a fashion which is never quite that of any other nation...." This type of approach to understanding international policy has much to recommend it: it shows how one might account for distinctive tendencies, characteristic reactions, and recurrent patterns in the actions and attitudes of a particular country without attributing these to the unworkable notion of "character." It also indicates that while a model crafted around PE applies uniquely to America, a similar style of analysis might well be applied to other nations (in the spirit of "comparative exceptionalism" mentioned above). Yet as Hoffmann (1968, 362) cautioned, "this way is a procedure of selection, and therefore inevitably one of exclusion, and it is a procedure of distortion, because things that may be important are left out and also because the things selected are refracted through the prism" of analysis.

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

An important qualification must be stated here. A cognitive filter acts on information, on perceptions. Thus the model is concerned with *perceived* threats, with subjective (or intersubjective) judgments about international affairs. This qualification is important for several reasons. First, the model does not claim that Americans' perceptions are objectively accurate; it brackets epistemological questions about what constitutes a true understanding of the world or a real threat. Treating PE as a cognitive *filter* indicates that it sorts and distorts information. Some "real" threats might not appear as such once filtered through PE; some perceived "threats" might be exaggerated or distorted. Second, allowing for the fallibility of public perceptions allows for the possibility of their manipulation. As we shall see below, PE selects certain events as important or urgent and frames responses to this information in predictable ways; elites can shape their rhetoric and selectively withhold or release information in attempting to manipulate perceptions, thereby capitalizing on strategic opportunities. Manipulation

need not be cynical; it can also be used to align values and strategies (see McEvoy-Levy 2001, 157). Finally, emphasizing perceptions reminds us that no two peoples view the world in the same way; their different cognitive filters mean that, perceptually at least, they live in different worlds.⁴

So, PE shapes Americans' perceptions of the international environment, including, crucially, their assessments of threats facing the United States. These judgments are based on information refracted through their cognitive filter. Once these perceptions crystallize, PE provides the cognitive frame in which responses to these judgments are conceived. At this stage, PE shapes the style and orientation of American international policy and constrains the range of policy options available to decision-makers.⁵ Broadly, PE suggests that when the external environment and levels of threat are perceived to be normal, America will tend toward isolationism; when events or trends pose a grave threat, however, America will adopt a messianic style of engagement. (I shall elaborate on those crucial terms and predictions shortly.)

[Figure 1 about here]

In the first phase of the model ($t=0$), PE acts as a cognitive filter. This filter works by selecting threats to liberty and democracy as especially salient. Such threats tend to be equated or conflated with threats to the United States; that is, a threat to liberty and democracy anywhere registers as a threat to America (equation), and any threat to America is perceived as a threat to liberty and democracy generally (conflation). The reasons for this selection trace to the republican formulation of the errand. PE collapses America's fate into those of liberty and democracy and constructs the latter as wholly dependent upon the former –Americans as the last, best hope. In addition, PE selects

anything that might interrupt or corrupt the errand itself as a particular threat; existential threats – war or imminent attack – of course stand out, but anything that might erode or compromise America’s separateness (on which more below) also registers as highly salient. Other events and trends will appear “normal,” not necessarily insignificant or unimportant, but not urgent or central to the identity or purposes of the United States.

In the second phase, PE works as a cognitive frame, shaping responses to Americans’ perceptions of the external environment and its threats. When those threats are perceived to be grave, in the sense just explicated, PE promotes messianic engagement as an appropriate response; when the international situation appears normal, PE engenders isolationism. To understand these responses, consider first why PE supports isolationism as the normal or default orientation for American international policy. Recall that the belief in America’s special role in the world, in its providential errand, is deeply tied up with its geographical and spiritual separation from the rest of the world. It follows that this separation is itself central to the errand, something to be prized and protected. In the era of independence Americans remained convinced that separation was the medium necessary for their culture of liberty and democracy to flourish, a conviction that, along with the fact of their geographical separation (subsequently diminished by technological developments), formed the country’s isolationist instincts.

Three qualifications should be noted to this isolationist tendency. First, it does not indicate an abdication of leadership within the cognitive schema of PE. Rather, it suggest leadership by example, precisely on the analogy with a “city on a hill.” Second, these isolationist inclinations do not amount to total isolation; PE indicates a style and orientation, but there can always be exceptions to the general rule. The key point is that

absent extraordinary threats, PE sustains heightened skepticism toward international involvements. Finally, trade and the pursuit of trade are perfectly consistent with isolationism within PE's cognitive schema. From the chartering of the Virginia Company, trade has been closely linked to the unfolding of the errand. So for America isolation does not mean autarky; for a people whose experience includes no pre-commercial past, trade is more a natural state of affairs than a policy.

PE also generates specific expectations about the isolationist style or orientation of American international policy. Isolationism will be distinguished by a pragmatic outlook, one that advances conventional American interests while avoiding unnecessary conflicts or entanglements with their corrupting potential. This pragmatism (which Hoffmann identified as a hallmark of his "American style") extends a typically American can-do attitude (and aversion to complexity) to international affairs. The central objective of American isolationism is preservation: of American wealth, safety, and crucially, of separation itself. The tone and rhetoric of policy in the isolationist style will be traditional and moralistic: American leaders and diplomats will speak in the language of providence, liberty, and democracy even as they otherwise adhere to a more traditional diplomatic idiom. Both strategically and tactically, international policy will be conducted unilaterally. Unilateralism is also consistent with the American emphasis on self-reliance, one of the qualities instrumental to success in fulfilling the providential mission.

When external threats appear grave – when liberty or democracy seem endangered or when the country seems acutely vulnerable – PE promotes a messianic style of international engagement. In these instances the errand itself seems imperiled, leading, perhaps counter-intuitively, to its internationalization. I refer to the style and

orientation of this engagement as “messianic” in light of certain distinctive qualities and characteristics in which it differs dramatically from the isolationist policy just described. When threats are grave, engagement seems unavoidable; preservation of the errand, and by extension of liberty and democracy, become sacred duties. PE engenders a redemptive outlook for international policy in such instances, with American actions conceived not merely as meeting a threat but rather as cleansing and purifying the world of the evil that gave rise to it. Messianic engagement therefore promotes transformative objectives; it aims to refashion the world in America’s image, implementing the model of democratic liberty it has worked out in its splendid isolation. Transformation and redemption go hand in glove: in recreating the world, America simultaneously ensures its salvation; anything less invites further danger and leaves the errand unfinished. Messianism speaks a moralizing (not just moralistic) language appropriate to these ambitions, adopting an uncompromising tone and offering stark contrasts, black and white against the diplomat’s gray on gray. To be against America is to oppose freedom, to stand against a providentially-sanctioned enterprise, a chosen people; America’s enemies are evil, proof of which lies in their very status as enemies.

Importantly, PE gives rise to no clear predilection for the strategic or tactical aspects of international policy in times of messianic engagement. Unilateralism or multilateralism might be pursued. America will typically welcome allies who share its understanding of the threat and its uncompromising approach to addressing it. Even where it gathers allies, however, America reserves the right to act unilaterally in cases when allies are unwilling to pursue a particular course America deems necessary and appropriate. While the cooperation of allies might be desirable, it is not an end in itself;

when engagement is required, America will go it alone if it must. It must always use its liberty to do the right thing. In the messianic scheme, alliances say more about the willingness of potential allies to accept American leadership and do the right thing than about calculations of efficiency, effectiveness, or diplomacy on America's part.

[Table 1 about here]

Again, several qualifications must be made. First, the model suggests more than that, when faced with grave threats, America will respond aggressively; this would hardly distinguish the United States from any other country. Rather, the crucial point is to show that the character of this response, its style, outlook, objectives, and rhetoric – are profoundly shaped by PE and can be anticipated through careful analysis of it. Put differently, the point is to say something important and useful about how the United States conceives, constructs, and carries out international policy and to say it in a way that provides predictive power. A second, related qualification concerns the complexity of PE. My position must not be confused with more simplistic – if increasingly commonplace – view that American religious beliefs call for a messianic role in the world. The framework developed here attempts to show systematically in what instances and under what conditions PE promotes messianic engagement, and in what instances it instead supports isolationism. The third qualification is that while military action might often be central to American policy in times of messianic engagement, it need not be so. A messianic diplomacy (perhaps including threats of military action) with characteristics directly analogous to those just described is also plausible. (Conversely, military action might be undertaken in isolationist times for quite limited and pragmatic reasons.) So the

model is not, or not primarily, interested in predicting the use of force; it is interested in the style and orientation of international policy more broadly.

To recapitulate: PE serves as a cognitive schema that shapes and constrains American reactions and responses to the international environment. Normally (as I have defined that term) America will exhibit isolationist tendencies consistent with its interest in its own providential mission and its related preoccupation with separation. When grave threats arise, PE engenders a messianic response, a style of engagement oriented toward redeeming and transforming the world. I am not suggesting that PE determines American reactions and responses; it strongly conditions them, but other factors are also important. Nor am I suggesting that these reactions and responses are deliberate; they resemble reflexes, an almost automatic responses to external stimuli patterned by deeply ingrained predispositions. This model of PE as a cognitive schema possesses several advantages over other depictions of the American character, identity, or style; principally, its dynamism. Most similar claims are static, positing that Americans believe X and so do Y. PE itself is a postulate, but the model allows for variation on the independent variables to explain variation in the dependent variables at two stages. This sophistication makes the model more sensitive to nuance, gives it greater predictive power, and makes it amenable to testing through comparison with the historical record.

PE and American Engagement: 1776-1989

As Davis and Lynn-Jones (1987, 32) argue, American exceptionalism provides the context for the cycles observed in American foreign policy. The model presented here extends and systematizes such generalizations: if isolation and messianism are two sides

of a coin, the PE framework explains which side is up, and why, at various historical junctures. It also deepens and extends our understanding of these policy orientations, revealing something about the outlook, objectives, and tone associated with each. Unfortunately, space prevents a detailed consideration of public perceptions about international events and policy responses to them; the following account intends only to establish the general plausibility of the model by putting readers in mind of facts with which they are already familiar.

America's crusader tendencies have been widely and frequently remarked upon; one popular foreign policy textbook declares that America has a "penchant for crusades" (Hook and Spanier 2000, 18; cf. Lipset 1996, 65; Hartz 1955, 286). The American "mythology" includes "ideals of crusade and mission," that are part and parcel of its "national destiny of liberty and equality" (Robertson 1980, 28). Connections between America's isolationist and messianic impulses have also been noted; (Hartz 1955, 286) called American messianism "the polar counterpart of its isolationism." (Huntington 1982, 19) traces to the American "identity"

the recurring tendency... either to retreat to minimum relations with the rest of the world and thus avoid the problem of reconciling the pursuit of self-interest with adherence to principle in a corrupt and hostile environment, or the opposite solution, to set forth on a "crusade" to purify the world, to bring it into accord with American principles.

We have already noted how exceptionalist rhetoric framed independence as part of a divine or providential plan for the unfolding of liberty and democracy. Following the conclusion of the war for independence, the country quickly followed its separatist instincts; "the sense that America's very liberal joy lay in the escape from a decadent Old World that could only infect it with its own diseases" was strong from the beginning

(Hartz 1955, 285). Washington's famous Farewell Address, which warned against foreign entanglements, is only the most famous of a long line of such admonitions. After the nearly disastrous War of 1812, which had been sold using a renewed rhetoric of liberty and independence from the United Kingdom, Monroe issued his prophylactic doctrine of European non-interference in the Western hemisphere, which translated Washington's sentiment into an isolationist policy redolent of providentialism. This isolationism persisted, largely uninterrupted, until the eve of the first world war.

Two apparent divergences from PE's expectations, upon close examination, confirm its fit with American policy in the nineteenth century. The first is the Mexican War. The Polk administration took pains to present the war, which it had calculatingly provoked, as one necessitated by Mexican interference with the liberties and democratic rights of Anglo-Texans, threats that PE would elevate to the highest level. Perhaps more importantly, the war was probably understood by contemporaries less as an international engagement than a moment in the domestic unfolding of America's manifest destiny – which, as we have seen, was the traveling attire of PE as it traversed North America. Mexico geographically blocked the United States' natural and providential expansion across the continent to the Pacific; it had the misfortune of standing, literally and figuratively, between America and its destiny to straddle a continent. Professed anxieties about the fragile liberties of the Anglo-Texans (whose legal status was dubious) were cleverly designed simultaneously to build up and play into the sentiment for national expansion already afoot in the United States.

The second apparent exception is the Spanish-American War and the brief American experiment with imperialism that accompanied it. There are two notable

aspects of this misadventure that confirm the general expectations of PE. First, though Spain's ability and intention to threaten the United States was doubtful, the explosion of the *Maine* and its sensationalization by the media ensured that the drums of war beat out distinctively exceptionalist rhythms. The media's excesses transcended this well-known example, however, so that public perception of the international environment and the threats it posed were thoroughly and effectively manipulated (as, apparently, was President McKinley, whose enthusiasm for war lagged that of the imperial faction that supported him in 1896; see Lott 2004). Second, the ensuing imperial dalliances were packaged in the providential trappings of an internationalized manifest destiny. In 1900, Senator Albert Beveridge argued that "God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No." America was destined to bring order to chaos, to civilize "savage and senile peoples," through good government, and to prevent "a relapse into barbarism and night." In sum, God "has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the redemption of the world (cited in (Bellah 1975, 38). Few seem to have shared the Senator's sentiments, however: despite the media frenzy stoking the fires of war, the venture generated only meager public support, while eliciting a vociferous anti-imperial response, one critical of militarism abroad as inconsistent with American moral principles. The apparent contradiction between imperialism and the mission to spread liberty and democracy was too much for many to swallow.

Wilson's "flip-flop" on the Great War exemplifies how PE can recommend both isolation or messianism. During the campaign of 1916 Wilson used exceptionalist rhetoric to justify keeping the country out of war, warning of the perils and

entanglements of a European war; once he decided American entry was unavoidable, he famously invoked a crusading rhetoric, persuading a reluctant country to join the war that would end all wars and “make the world safe for democracy” (see (Davis and Lynn-Jones 1987). The peril facing liberty and democracy justified American involvement, since only America could meet this grave threat. In keeping with this redemptive outlook and moralizing tone, Wilson developed a transformational objective, imagining not only a just peace but global mechanisms that would make subsequent wars impossible. In this international order all nations would be equal, like citizens in a democracy, and imperialism would be torn up by the roots before it again flowered into war. This vision of redemption from colonialism and transformation toward international democracy was defeated by the Allies at Versailles, by Senator Lodge and a conservative Senate in Washington, and by a tired and apathetic public (Judis 2003, 21). With the immediate threats vanquished, weary Americans happily retreated into the embrace of a consoling isolationism and unprecedented wealth. The vision’s failure is often used to denigrate Wilsonian idealism; here, I only want to highlight that both the scheme and its domestic rejection match the expectations of PE.

This renewed isolationism proved so deep that it took a surprise attack on an American naval station to drag the country into World War II. Even this war, fully justifiable in terms of self-defense, was from *before* its beginning couched in terms of a broader redemptive outlook and transformative objective. Allied policy, as first sketched by Roosevelt and Churchill in the Atlantic Charter the summer preceding Pearl Harbor, promised nothing less than civil and political freedoms and freedom from fear and want for all the world. Roosevelt promised Americans and the world an era of permanent

peace and cooperation, again pursuing decolonization and international cooperation through a variety multilateral institutions ranging from NATO, the United Nations, and the Bretton Woods triplets (the World Bank, IMF, and GATT). These institutions, along with the Marshall Plan, demonstrate not only the transformationalist ambitions of the Americans but also the nonmilitary side of messianism.

This ambitious agenda was spared the fate of Wilson's Fourteen Points perhaps because the perception took hold before the war's end that the Soviet Union posed a new and lasting threat. The Cold War struggle was depicted in world-historical, even apocalyptic, terms. The Cold War doctrine of containment remade the prophylactic impulse of American isolationism as an aggressive policy of international engagement on the messianic model. American international policy had a clear redemptive orientation: to purge the evil of "Godless communism" from the world and to correct its fallacious notions of human freedom. (Framing the Vietnam conflict as an anticommunist crusade made it "unlosable" for President Johnson; (Hook and Spanier 2000, 131-2). It sought an ambitious transformational objective: the defeat of a global superpower, the liberation of Eastern Europe and other strongholds of Communism, and the spread of liberal democracy, American style, throughout the world. The soaring rhetoric and uncompromising policies of Kennedy and Reagan are the best examples of this: when Kennedy set out to "let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and success of liberty"; when Reagan famously called the Soviet Union an "evil empire," and denounced a "deadening accommodation with totalitarian evil," they proved worthy exemplars of rhetorical style and policy prescriptions of PE.

Only when the cause of freedom, justice, or democracy demands it does America venture forth, and then in messianic style.⁶ In such circumstances “Americans must define their role in a conflict as being on God’s side against Satan – for morality, against evil” (Lipset 1996, 20). Such uncompromising moralism dominates messianic engagement, linking the use of force with the country’s principles in the national psyche (Hook and Spanier 2000, 18). “If circumstances oblige [the US] to cooperate with evil regimes, they are converted into agents of virtue”; Churchill welcomed Stalin as an ally even while denouncing his brutality, while America created the mythical image of the benign, pipe-smoking “Uncle Joe” for popular consumption (Lipset 1996, 66). Throughout the Cold War, America repeatedly allied with unsavory regimes, “friendly tyrants” whose opposition to the greater evil of Communism led the United States not only to overlook but to condone, cooperate with, and whitewash their authoritarianism, their use of torture, and their abuse of human rights (Pipes and Garfinkle 1991).

While PE has no definitive expectations with respect to the strategic and tactical orientation of international policy, it is consistent with what former Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot described as a policy of “strategic multilateralism and tactical unilateralism” during the Cold War (cited in Koh 2003, 1499). This accommodation was facilitated by a broad agreement among America and its allies on the terms, scope, and importance of the conflict. This is not to say that the allies never chafed at American rhetoric or actions, from the evil empire speech and the deployment of missiles in Western Europe to US support for friendly tyrants. The point to emphasize is that America was willing to pursue a multilateral strategy and use multilateral tactics when its allies were on the same page, but it never hesitated to act unilaterally when it felt justified

in doing so. NATO's multilateralism was maintained as much by the flexibility it afforded America to adopt unilateralist tactics as by agreement on the strategy itself.

Again, this brief overview is intended merely to demonstrate the plausibility of the PE model as a way of understanding the style and orientation of American international policy. Skeptics might object that I have merely described American policy in terms consistent with the PE framework. My main objection to this characterization is to the word "merely"; that the framework adequately captures American policy, with its various swings from isolation to engagement and its distinctive outlook, objectives, and tone, shows its utility as an heuristic device. It surpasses accounts of American isolationism and messianism that simplistically explain particular events or trends or note without elaboration the uneasy coexistence of both tendencies in American policy. The model's power is not merely "post-dictive," however; in the following three sections I show how it changes our understanding of the post-Cold War period and how it enhances our insight into particular puzzles about human rights.

1989 – 2001: American International Policy Adrift

In this section I use the PE framework to explain the confusion besetting American international policy in what we might call – with kudos to Hobbsbawm – the long 1990s: that period from 1989 to September 11, 2001, when America, flush with victory, nonetheless found itself oddly adrift. The euphoria that accompanied the fall of the Berlin Wall quickly gave way to uncertainty for American international policy. Francis Fukuyama (1992) famously interpreted the end of the Cold War as the "end of history," touching off a storm of debate and criticism. However naïve or simplistic his broader

argument, Fukuyama's premise, his framing of these events in eschatological terms, made perfect sense from the perspective of PE. Since the Cold War itself had been framed as a struggle pitting liberty and democracy against totalitarianism in a world-historical struggle, casting the collapse of Communism as a victory of good over evil and the dawn of a new liberal Eden was hardly atypical, if somewhat over the top. The triumphalism accompanying this victory attributed it not to superior Western military capabilities and economic productivity directly but rather to the superior virtue and strength of purpose and leadership owing to the rightness of the Western cause – as the recent apotheoses of President Reagan and Pope John Paul II clearly illustrate.

Such a victory signifies redemption and a historical moment of transformation. In this case Fukuyama anticipated that the enemy's defeat heralded the spread of liberalism and democracy around the world, what President G.H.W. Bush called, in distinctively providential jargon, "a new world order." In 1991, after successfully assembling a global coalition to reverse the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the president described to Congress the

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

Yet like Wilson's transformative ambitions after the Great War, the new world order proved elusive. Though Saddam Hussein had been duly vilified as an evil dictator before the war, uncompromising insistence on total surrender was bargained away for the sake of maintaining a broad and diverse coalition. This partial victory undercut the war's redemptive outlook and transformative objectives and helped to undermine the order it purported to inaugurate; by 1992 the Gulf War had become an albatross for its

commander in chief, whose opponent criticized his foreign preoccupations and used exceptionalist rhetoric in calling for a renewed domestic focus. Some critics in the president's party openly called for a return to isolationism (McEvoy-Levy 2001, 71-95).

The Clinton Administration's international policy wavered uncertainly between isolation and engagement; it was an essentially pragmatic, trade-oriented multilateralism with limited transformative ambitions. Clinton was criticized by liberals both for the human rights interventions he undertook (Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo) and for those he did not (Rwanda, compromise on trade with China). Meanwhile, conservatives were divided (except in their contempt for Clinton); some advocated a return to isolationism and protectionism reminiscent of the Republican position throughout the 1920s, while "others, led by neoconservatives such as Paul Wolfowitz, William Kristol, Richard Perle, and Robert Kagan, continued to advocate the transformation of the world in America's image" (Judis 2003, 22), a revival of the "muscular patriotism of Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan" (Kristol, cited in Judis 2003, 22). In 1997, a group of prominent neoconservative thinkers inaugurated the Project for the New American Century, stating that "American foreign policy is adrift." They criticized conservatives for failing to articulate an alternative to what they called President Clinton's (and implicitly President Bush's) "incoherent policies," advocating a return to a "Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity" that would "shape a new century favorable to American principles and interests" (Abrams et al 1997).

The split reaction of conservatives to the new world order reflects the competing imperatives of PE at a moment of historical change. The absence of a compelling threat, as after Versailles, drew the country inward, even as critics recognized the opportunities

for transformation that would be lost in the wake of the monumental triumph over the Soviet Union. In the long 1990s, as earlier, the isolationist impulse seemed to prevail; the neoconservative brand of neoimperialism gained little public traction. It is easy to forget today that G.W. Bush was elected not on the appeal of the neoconservative international policy his administration has since adopted but rather on the promise to conduct a humble foreign policy and to abjure the role of global policeman. His administration, despite the prominence of key neoconservatives, initially pursued a limited international policy, exactly as PE would predict. Certain prominent decisions or reversals, including the rejection of the Kyoto Accords and the “unsigning” of the treaty establishing the International Criminal Court, signaled a clear return to unilateralism, just as PE would predict. It is important to recall, however, that the trend began before G.W. Bush’s election: President Clinton had made clear his reservations about the ICC; candidate Gore signaled his unwillingness to push for ratification. The United States had long opposed Kyoto on the grounds that it asked too little of developing countries like China and India.

My point in this section is not to defend the isolationist tendencies of the long 1990s or to excuse the policy decisions of any administration. It is rather to show that, after much wavering and much talk of a transformative new world order, the country was drifting steadily if slowly back toward the kind of isolationist orientation that PE expects in the absence of grave threats. This fact is important to recall because it allows us to distinguish the pre-9/11 unilateralism of the present administration, which continued an isolationist trend, with the very different messianic unilateralism that followed; while apparently of a piece, they represent quite divergent trends. I return to this theme below; first, I turn to the puzzle of American human rights leadership.

The United States' Paradoxical Leadership on International Human Rights

One of the central puzzles regarding American international policy concerns the paradoxical role of American leadership on international human rights. The United States has been a leader in creating and supporting organizations like the UN and has provided a strong voice – and strong hand – in support of human rights around the world, yet it often exempts itself from stipulations of treaties that it does not like, fails to comply with its treaty and other obligations, and refuses to sign or ratify treaties it has negotiated (*exemptionalism*; Ignatieff forthcoming, 4). In addition, the US frequently applies *double standards*, judging other countries by high standards while excusing or denying violations by itself and its allies (Mertus 2004). Finally, the American legal system resists international human rights jurisprudence and is reluctant to incorporate human rights provisions into US law (*legal isolationism*; Ignatieff forthcoming, 5; Ignatieff 2002; Koh 2003).

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

Three aspects of the belief in America's providential errand bear directly on this puzzle: its foundations in separateness, the federal idea of liberty, and the notion of America as a city on a hill, an exemplar for the world. Separateness has received extensive discussion already and I shall not rehearse those arguments again. Recall simply that separateness facilitates development of the purified institutions through which rehabilitation of a corrupt world is to take place; it is a necessary but not sufficient condition of creating moral institutions (which can be subverted by failure of purpose or understanding). The federal conception of liberty, in which freedom is used to do the right thing, to secure salvation, makes popular sovereignty a mechanism for affirming God's purposes by submitting to them. Finally, the city on a hill is an exemplar of virtue – ideally, of virtue realized, but potentially of virtue betrayed as well. Like the scripture from which it borrows, this view commends leadership by example; it is in this sense that America's errand implies a right and an obligation to lead (cf. McEvoy-Levy 2001, 143).

These features of PE helpfully illuminate American practices of exemptionalism and legal isolationism. The latter is directly implied by separateness; submission to outside laws, norms, or institutions limits full devotion to the divine ends America strives to realize. Because the outside world is imagined as venal, corrupt, and of doubtful moral purpose, moreover, submission might interfere with providential ends or taint American institutions. A similar logic applies to exemptionalism; it is less that Americans disagree with the substance of the rights they refuse to enact or ratify than that they doubt both the necessity and the wisdom of binding themselves through international mechanisms, especially because of their faith that they are more likely than others to get matters right to begin with. From this perspective, the paradox of American refusal to ratify and

implement international human rights agreements and its record of strong and vigorous domestic compliance and enforcement makes sense (cf. Ignatieff forthcoming).

Much of America's seemingly paradoxical behavior is, if not explained, at least rendered less puzzling by showing its consistency with the particular (though peculiar) cognitive schema of PE. By applying the model based on this schema and the policy expectations it generates, we can add depth and complexity to this understanding.

Consider first periods of messianic engagement. We have already seen how PE leads to the whitewashing of authoritarian allies with sometimes appalling human rights records in the name of a broader redemptive and transformative struggle often justified as a defense of human rights. This double standard becomes all the more galling in light of the moralizing and uncompromising rhetoric typical of messianic engagement, rhetoric in light of which the hypocrisy of American double standards seems especially egregious. In addition, the transformative objectives articulated during periods of messianic engagement might often include new or expanded commitments to democracy and human rights in some form, as after both world wars and the collapse of Communism.

Crucially, PE expects change in both of these areas when threats recede. First, with respect to double standards, we would anticipate that in periods of isolation the United States would have less need of unsavory allies. It is perhaps telling in this connection that President Carter, who touted human rights as the centerpiece of his foreign policy, was unable to do much to link American aid to human rights performance (Stohl, Carleton, and Johnson 1984); after 1989, both President G.H.W. Bush and President Clinton had much better success in making American assistance conditional upon human rights performance. Similarly, we have seen how after two of the three

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

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

understanding can rescue us from prevalent misconceptions and oversimplifications regarding recent American international policy, especially on human rights.

PE and 9/11: Reverting to Form

We are frequently told that 9/11 changed everything. Did it? The second puzzle we set out to explain through PE is the recent change in American international policy, and especially human rights policy, after 9/11. In this section I argue that while there has certainly been a notable and significant change in American policy, this change indicates a reversion to form. Recent policy marks not an unprecedented departure from past American policy but rather a return to familiar and predictable patterns of behavior. I shall first show this with respect to the drift of American policy generally, then with particular attention to human rights policy.

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

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

[the ACLU has] got to take a lot of blame for [the September 11 attacks].... The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way – all of them who have tried to secularize America – I point the finger in their face and say, “You helped this happen”.

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

The war on terror also has a transformative objective: to rid the world of “evildoers.” The practical implications are plain enough: the goal of American policy is to destroy terrorist networks and, if necessary, the nations that harbor them. It is enlightening to keep this objective in mind as we consider the quick erosion of the global solidarity felt with the United States in the hours and days following the attacks. While Europeans shared Americans’ horror – as well as, perhaps, some of their fears about radical Islam – they could not identify with the policies undertaken in pursuit of this far-reaching objective. As critics noted, Europeans have extensive and sobering experience

with terrorism, experience that colors their perceptions regarding the origins and nature of the threat and of appropriate responses to it. Just as significantly, Europeans were generally not persuaded, as most Americans were, by the administration's efforts to link Iraq with Al Qaeda and the wider war on terrorism. Much of America's unilateralism since 9/11 reflects this gulf in perceptions; like the ends of World War I and the Gulf War, and unlike the end of World War II, America could not enlist many allies in "doing the right thing." The Cold War alignment of strategic multilateralism and tactical unilateralism has been reversed; America is going it alone, though on particular issues – Iran, North Korea – it is willing to work with allies where common ground exists.⁷

With respect to human rights, the reversion to Cold War form is eerily complete. The United States has exempted itself from the Geneva conventions and the Convention on Torture, and has done so at the highest levels, as a matter of policy. It has once again adopted gross double standards, allying with such human rights-abusive regimes as Pakistan and Uzbekistan and condoning Chinese and Russian aggression against nationalist minority groups while decrying the human right abuses of its newfound foes. Moreover, the war on terror – with its efforts to rid the world of evildoers and to put freedom on the march using such tactics as indefinite detention without charges, rendition, and torture – has given renewed vigor and conclusive evidence to those who charge the United States with hypocrisy. If history repeats itself as tragedy, the tragedy of American human rights policy since 9/11 was written in Cold War. In almost all respects, in style and in substance, the United States has reverted to its Cold War form.

Conclusions

In concluding, I want to remark briefly on three areas of confusion regarding American international policy clarified by my account. The first concerns the alleged tension between realist and idealist tendencies in American policy. From the perspective developed here, this divide seems overstated. Many American policies and actions seem quite consistent with realist expectations, yet those same policies and actions are frequently justified in providentialism's moralizing and uncompromising rhetoric. Frequently critics charge the United States with hypocrisy for this reason; PE paints a more complicated picture. Consider Wilson and Reagan, often portrayed as polar opposites on a continuum of idealism and realism; PE colors both with the same palate. My point is not that the distinction between realism and idealism is meaningless but rather that, in the American context, it often obscures more than it illuminates.

The second confusion concerns our assessment of recent changes in American policy since 9/11. I have argued that the American reaction to the terrorist attacks has been exactly as PE would anticipate; this change, a reversion to Cold War form, is hugely important but not terribly surprising. Seen through the lens of PE, the much more interesting period is the long 1990s, during which time successive presidents from both parties struggled to articulate and justify sustained multilateral engagement against the isolationist reflex engendered by PE. Their failures are a caution and a challenge for those who would guide American international policy along a different path.

Finally, critics of the present administration (among whom I count myself) have been quick to ascribe the war on terror and associated policies to the dominance of neoconservatives, to a new imperialist impulse, to the foreign policy priorities of evangelical Christians, and to numerous other sources. The thrust of my argument here

has been that doing so is a mistake. The broad contours and many specifics of the administration's war on terror are perfectly consistent with what providential exceptionalism would expect. Had President Gore been in the oval office on 12 September 2001, he would probably have devised a policy broadly similar to the one we are presently pursuing. The invasion of Iraq stands out as a crucial and immensely important exception; still, to say that everything changed after 9/11 and to locate those changes in the idiosyncrasies of the Bush Administration denies the long history of messianic engagement in the United States and the constraints that, for good or ill, shape American international policy.

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented at the conference *The United States and Global Human Rights* held at Oxford University's Rothermere American Institute in November 2004, where I received helpful comments and suggestions. I owe special thanks to Michael Ignatieff, who generously provided a forthcoming manuscript and his encouragement, and to Siobhán McEvoy-Levy, who kindly critiqued an earlier draft. Her work on this subject has deeply influenced my thinking. Heather Elko McKibben provided exemplary research assistance and many helpful suggestions.

² The use of scare quotes here indicates that the "war on terror" is deeply controversial as policy and rhetoric. I shall dispense with quotation marks hereafter, but terms like "war on terror" should be recognized throughout as ideologically freighted.

³ In four polls conducted between 1981 and 1990, between 79% and 81% of respondents agreed that America has a "special role to play in the world today (data from the iPOLL Databank provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. Unfortunately, no similar data are available for other decades.

⁴ Models like mine presume that the cognitive schema itself is widely shared; the plausibility of this presumption affects the model's plausibility in specific cases.

⁵ I assume that in a democracy decisions about international policy are broadly constrained (not determined) by public opinion; see Davis and Lynn-Jones 1987.

⁶ Debates over international policy typically focus on threats in America; when consensus exists on a grave threat, there is typically little debate over policy.

⁷ Elite manipulation worked exactly as the model anticipates in the run up to war in Iraq; the best analog is the run-up to the Spanish-American War; see Lott 2004.

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Figure 1.
PE as a Cognitive Filter/Frame

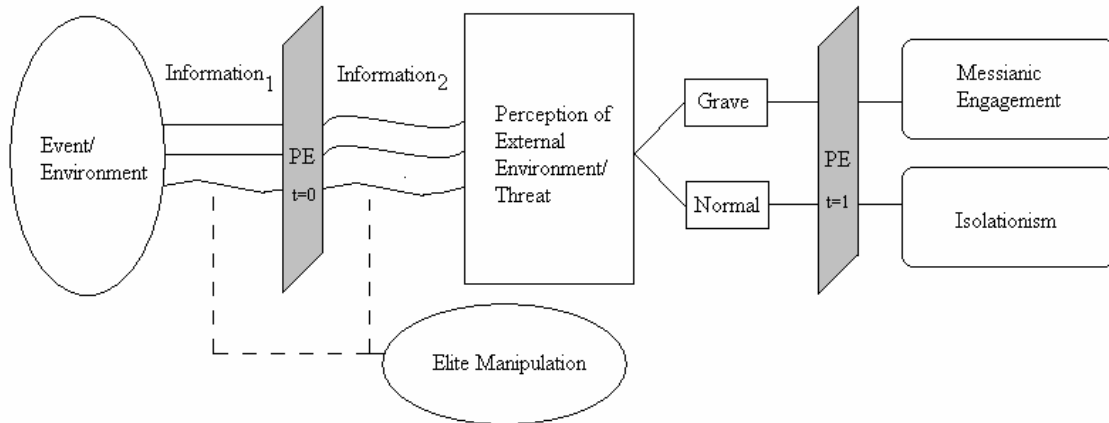


Figure 1. Information about international events or the international environment (information₁) is refracted through the cognitive filter of PE (at t=0); this refracted information (information₂) shapes Americans' perceptions about the external environment and threats. Elite manipulation of information at the first stage can impact how threats are perceived. Once these perceptions take hold, PE subsequently (at t=1) frames the likely response: when threats appear grave, the United States opts for messianic engagement; when threats seem normal, the country tends toward isolationism.

Table 1.
International Policy under Providential Exceptionalism

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