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Is American Foreign Policy Exceptional?
An Empirical Analysis

JOSEPH LEPGOLD
TIMOTHY McKEOWN

At least since Alexis de Tocqueville's era, the only clearly articulated view of American foreign policy has been exceptionalism, which holds that Americans deprecate power politics and old-fashioned diplomacy, mistrust powerful standing armies and entangling peacetime commitments, make moralistic judgments about other people's domestic systems, and believe that liberal values transfer readily to foreign affairs.¹ These dispositions, which seem to rest on the premise that war and peace are polar opposites, are at last consistent with and may help to explain America's oft-noted all-or-nothing approach to foreign commitments. This approach, in turn, is consistent with oscillations between major involvement overseas and significant retrenchment.² According to this view, because American values are strongly inconsistent with the methods and objectives of Realpolitik, the country has a more messianic, erratic style abroad than has been typical of other great powers.


JOSEPH LEPGOLD teaches at Georgetown University in the School of Foreign Services and department of government. His next book is an edited volume on burden-sharing in the Persian Gulf War. TIMOTHY McKEOWN teaches in the political science department at the University of North Carolina. He is finishing a book on the politics of U.S. foreign aid.
As prevalent as these claims have been, they have not been tested: we do not know if or in what sense U.S. foreign behavior is idiosyncratic. This article tests the conventional wisdom on these matters in three straightforward ways. Each examines whether an aspect of U.S. behavior discussed prominently in the literature has been atypical of the major powers. We conclude that claims of exceptional U.S. external behavior have been exaggerated, although more research is needed to determine whether other dimensions of U.S. foreign policy that have been widely discussed, such as its presentation to domestic audiences, are indeed highly atypical.

The next section reviews the claims that are made in the literature on American exceptionalism. We then identify questions one would ask were these claims to be taken seriously as hypotheses about behavior and its sources. We then discuss our data, methods, and hypothesis tests. We conclude by discussing what our findings imply for the exceptionalism arguments and by suggesting some directions for future research.

ARGUMENTS ABOUT AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

A core assertion in the literature on U.S. exceptionalism is that Americans think of war and peace as polar opposites. Peace is held to be the norm, since its advantages have seemed self-evident, while war is viewed as a product of evil leaders. When they do fight, "the American preference is for aggressive actions followed by going home and back to normal as soon as possible." This disposition has been part of a broader self-image, in which America has seen itself as the New World (a classless, politically open society) in sharp contrast to the Old World (composed of feudal societies and, originally, repressive governments). Along with this distinction went another: Old World countries were seen to relate to one another through power, while Americans dealt with the world through commercial and legal mechanisms. This view may simply be a moralistic interpretation of America's insular, sheltered experience, but it is thought to be pervasive. It would follow from this belief that one negotiates seriously only when "peace" is possible — that is, when one's foes have been vanquished and there is no longer a threat to one's values. As Henry Kissinger put it, "the [American] instrument for settling disputes during periods of peace was [seen as] diplomacy, which we conceived as being analogous to commercial negotiations, attaching a disproportionate emphasis to bargaining technique." Ongoing bargaining with adversaries and potential adversaries contradicts these beliefs, since it presumes that war is a continuation of nonforcible interaction by other means rather than something fundamentally different politically.


This dichotomous view of international life is consistent with an American tendency to make many foreign security commitments during periods of conflict but to turn inward after the conflict is over. Frank Klingberg, who first tried to explain these oscillations, did not attach much causal weight to deep-seated feelings that the country had either an “exceptional” mission abroad or none. He simply noted, as one possible explanation for the cycles, that “America, until recently at least, has been in a geographic and economic position which has enabled her to withdraw from world politics more than any other power.” But others see the ability to withdraw from involvement abroad, which is not an option for most countries, as an underlying cause of the cyclical patterns in U.S. behavior, even if this observation is not always explicit in their work. Several of them note that absent a national emergency to which Americans can respond at full throttle, Americans tend to grow weary of foreign commitments or the executive’s authority to manage them; when “the ambiguities of an imperfect world” intrude, Americans show little tolerance for sustained, contingent strategic interaction.

Because it is believed that Americans see conflict and war as unnatural, scholars agree that they view the instruments and objectives of Realpolitik suspiciously. They prefer general principles in foreign affairs, especially moralistic and legal ones, to a context-dependent approach. And because they tend to apply these principles to themselves as well as to others, they normally “feel alienated from the struggle for power among nations.” For both reasons, it is believed that the United States can often be expected to lack the flexibility enjoyed by less open political systems.

U.S. attitudes towards military institutions exemplify this. While deeply respectful of technical military prowess, Americans have tended traditionally to view large standing armies as unnecessary and as a threat to liberty. They are thought to be unnecessary because the nation’s liberal value system sees conflict as essentially avoidable. They are seen as a threat to liberty because military discipline is incompatible with the open nature of civilian life and because militaries historically have been sinecures for and instruments of the aristocracy. Even though these sentiments characterized feelings toward both the army and

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7 Klingberg, “The Historical Alternation of Moods,” 266.
10 Huntington, The Soldier and the State, 150.
navy during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Americans have mistrusted armies more. Perhaps referring to the way British soldiers were billeted in colonial homes during the mid-eighteenth century and to the army's greater visibility in general, Thomas Jefferson said that "a naval force can never endanger our liberties, nor occasion bloodshed; a land force would do both."¹⁴ Later, because the army's officer corps was seen as an "aristocratic caste," the "West Point clique" was more a target of populist Jacksonians than the navy.¹⁵

Just as Americans are thought to see peace and conflict in either-or terms, they are often said to think of other nations' internal practices and institutions as either "good" or "bad," depending on their conformity to individualistic pluralism. Promoting liberal values abroad has thus been seen as a principal U.S. value, although clearly it can also be used to rationalize actions undertaken for other reasons. Observers, therefore, believe that unlike many other peoples, Americans have trouble acting abroad in ways that fail to reflect their internal principles. For instance, America's entry into World War I, although justifiable geopolitically, was sold and understood at home as a crusade for neutrals' rights and democracy.¹⁶ By implication, it is often claimed that Americans resist interacting abroad, short of war, with those of whom they morally disapprove.

These two dichotomies—commitment in emergencies vs. retrenchment in peace and "good" vs. "bad" actors abroad—in turn have been seen to produce a rigid, nonsituational approach to foreign commitments. Nonsituationalism emphasizes the general principle that underlies a commitment more than the rationality of honoring it at any particular time. While there are practical as well as principled reasons for taking this view, American cultural values are also thought to contribute to a nonsituational perspective. Deterrence theorists, for example, have argued that specific pledges matter mainly as symbols of a more general firmness. The moralistic reasoning is as follows: if Americans commit only to good causes, they can have only good allies, and deserting such an ally would be immoral.¹⁷

In sum, the exceptionalism literature depicts America as more rigid than one would otherwise expect a great power to be. This is largely because its nationalism is based on the perceived superiority of its ideals rather than race or the quest for material advantage.¹⁸ It is said to keep its promises, to refuse to fight for selfish advantage, and to try when possible to promote its ideals abroad. While this interpretation can be dismissed as simply self-serving, there is wide consensus on the main point: in general, America is thought to refuse to play the game of nations on any but its own moralistic terms. Along with George Washington's

¹⁵ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 156.
¹⁷ Weinstein, "The Concept of a Commitment," 52–53.
¹⁸ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 152. Note, however, the quite different view that race has played a key underlying motivation in shaping American identity; this is found in Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
maxim that Americans should avoid European alliances, these principles are said to have greatly "simplified" American foreign policy,¹⁹ as compared to countries that follow more flexible strategies.

A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE EXCEPTIONALIST ARGUMENT

We now turn to the questions one would ask about the exceptionalism argument if it were taken seriously as a set of hypotheses about behavior and the sources of behavior. Since the core exceptionalist assertion is that America is an outlier, with behavior patterns unlike those of other major nations, empirical falsification of this claim would cast serious doubts on the argument. A fair test requires that we specify the behavior that is expected to be different and how the degree of difference is to be assessed.

The literature pinpoints three areas in which one might expect America's behavior to differ from others. First, we would expect U.S. military forces to increase and decrease largely independently of those of other major powers before 1941, at least during periods when America was formally at peace. Americans should have been particularly loath during these years to compete with other great powers by building a substantial army, given their a priori predilections against it, as well as their distance from countries with major land forces. Not only was the United States able to stand to one side of the European great-power competition; as Tocqueville observed, large armies increase government power²⁰ and tend to transform low-tax polities in which government is unobtrusive into garrison states. In the absence of serious external threats, those reared to idealize the night-watchman state ought to have resisted this.

This expectation is buttressed by some well known facts. Because America prior to 1940 was not a player in the central balance of power, it did not develop the tightly centralized military staff system of the continental European states and Japan.²¹ Indeed, even after that, it still had far more decentralized military institutions than many other countries.²²

Interestingly, few discussions of the military's impact on government and society by Americans or those commenting on U.S. society explicitly discuss navies. As noted above, this could be because armies were regarded as inherently more obtrusive in British and early American culture. Alternatively, "army" in the early American lexicon could have applied to both land and naval forces generically. It is also possible that the lack of direct criticism of navies might be an implicit geopolitical loophole for an incipient maritime power.

Second, we expect to find that American diplomatic activity has been idiosyncratic as compared to other major states. Rather than viewing the representational

¹⁹ Tocqueville, Democracy in America, vol. i, 234.
²² Samuel P. Huntington, American Military Strategy, Policy Papers in International Affairs No. 28 (Berkeley: Institute of International Affairs, University of California, 1986), 30–33.
and informational functions of emissaries abroad in purely instrumental terms, which would suggest wide diplomatic links and close attention to the links established by others, the exceptionalist arguments imply that Americans have been far more selective and judgmental in this regard. In addition to the relative economic and military insularity the United States enjoyed before 1914, this inference is suggested by the moralistic stance Americans have often taken toward internal developments in other countries, especially revolutions. As Robert Dallek writes:

Americans have always been at odds with the outside world. And not without reason. Power struggles, wars, authoritarian governments, class divisions, extremes of wealth and poverty, and oppressed minorities were antithetical to American institutions and professed ideals; they made isolation from overseas affairs an attractive option and a fixed principle of foreign policy. . . . When the nation did reach beyond its borders in the period before 1945, its overseas involvements were cast as serving not national gain but larger moral ends. 23

Since the two centuries of America's national existence have seen much war and especially revolution, the exceptionalist arguments imply that America has ignored large parts of it diplomatically, significantly more so than the other major powers.

It follows that if the exceptionalism argument is correct, Americans should be observed using diplomatic relations with other countries as rewards and punishments for certain kinds of behavior, especially internal behavior, and that other major actors should do much less of this. There is ample anecdotal evidence for this: Woodrow Wilson's refusal to recognize the effective authority of Victoriano Huerta's government in Mexico, the sixteen-year delay in recognizing Soviet control of the Russian Empire, and the delay of almost thirty years before the United States recognized the Communist government on mainland China. In short, Americans tend to equate diplomatic recognition with moral and political approval, while other nations typically do not. Because international law has developed no clear distinctions between recognition of a government's effective existence and recognition as establishing and maintaining diplomatic relations,24 governments can only indicate disapproval of others by refusing to acknowledge their legal existence. Still, few governments do this, America being the most prominent apparent exception. We thus expect America to have fewer or more irregular diplomatic links than other major powers and to be markedly indifferent in establishing, maintaining, and modifying such links to others' comparable behavior.

Third, for reasons suggested above, we expect the pattern of American foreign security commitments to differ from those of other major states. Not only should there have been significantly fewer U.S. commitments before 1945, but the ones

America has made can be expected to have been more rigid. The reasons for this are long-standing: in his farewell address, George Washington implored his fellow citizens not "to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of [Europe's] politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships and enmities." Later, according to Kissinger, this practical maxim became an ideological value:

As the United States grew in strength and European rivalries focused on Europe, Africa, and Asia, Americans came to consider the isolation conferred by two great oceans as the normal pattern of foreign relations. . . . American political thought had come increasingly to regard diplomacy with suspicion. Arms and alliances were considered immoral and reactionary.

If America has indeed behaved exceptionally on this dimension, as this suggests, its alliance-making patterns should be markedly different from any other major actor.

Unfortunately, these hypotheses are necessarily imprecise. How would one know whether a state's military investments, diplomatic links abroad, and external commitments have been "exceptional"? To be exceptional means to be unusual or extraordinary, but this leaves us no a priori criteria for establishing the degree of difference that matters in assessing international behavior. Moreover, the extant literature provides little guidance, since it hardly ever compares the United States systematically and explicitly to other countries. There is no fully satisfactory solution to this quandary, but we deal with it in two ways. We first assume that the underlying commonality in all of America's allegedly exceptional behavior has been aloofness toward other major actors and relative inattention to the ordinary vicissitudes of their politics. America is presumed in the exceptionalist literature to prefer that it deal with the world on its own terms or not at all. It is explicitly or implicitly assumed not to react closely and consistently to the behavior of other actors. We then assume that such putative standoffishness can be approximately gauged by comparing the degree to which America reacts to other major countries with the others' rates of reactivity. In other words, how does America's degree of policy "elasticity"—its changes in behavior as a function of others' changes—compare to that of others? This implies use of a statistical model that compares national policy elasticities across each of the three variables discussed above.

Data, Methods, and Hypotheses

The data for this project come from three sources. Data on national military expenditures between 1816 and 1985 for each international system member as defined by the Correlates of War project come from COW. This project, con-

26 Kissinger, White House Years, 58-59.
ducted by J. David Singer at the University of Michigan and Melvin Small at Wayne State University, furnished many studies dealing with the causes of international conflict. It also furnished a large data set that many other scholars have used. These are measured annually in thousands of current-year British pounds through 1913 and annually in thousands of current-year U.S. dollars thereafter. Annual army and navy expenditures for Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Italy, and Austria-Hungary from 1871 to 1914 were taken from the Choucri-North _Nations in Conflict_ data set; comparable data for the United States were taken from _The Historical Abstracts of the United States_. The number and kind of diplomatic missions received by members of the interstate system from other members (as defined by COW) from 1816 through 1990 were provided by COW, though rank of mission was not recorded for the years 1950–1965. Finally, a list of types and members of interstate alliances that were formed between 1816 and 1990 was provided by COW.

The alliances and diplomatic missions data present some problems that should be briefly noted. First, although alliances were classified according to the COW three-level system of neutrality agreement, entente, and defense pact, they were available only in tabular list form. This precludes statistical tests without completely recoding the data, but there is so little alliance activity for the United States before 1945 that for our purposes such tests are unnecessary. It should also be mentioned that diplomatic missions received by nations were coded by COW only at five-year intervals, which makes it difficult to gauge states' reactivity in a very precise way.

All statistical models used in this paper take the form of Changes in U.S. Behavior is a function of changes in lags of others' behavior, because we are looking at nations' reactivity to other nations. As Kenneth Waltz notes, this _Realpolitik_ conception rests on the belief that "the fate of each state depends on its responses to what other states do."27 This is a simplification, but a defensible one, since some portion of national behavior can be presumed to be a reaction to the external environment. Alan Alexandroff, for instance, found in a quantitative examination of European diplomacy between 1870 and 1890 that others' actions rather than national attributes best explained states' behavior.28

Unlike most studies that use quantitative models, we pay no attention to whether particular coefficients on right-hand side variables are statistically significant. We instead examine only the overall goodness-of-fit of the respective equations. This amounts to testing a one-tailed hypothesis: American behavior is less reactive to foreign events than that of other countries. Hence, the goodness-of-fit for the American equations should be significantly less than the goodness-of-fit for the other countries examined. Only this finding would constitute a falsification of the null hypothesis that America is no less reactive to external stimuli than other countries.

27 Waltz, _Theory of International Politics_, 127.
For two reasons, we are interested in the differences in nations' behavior between times $t_0$ and $t_1$ rather than absolute levels. First, differencing the variables weakens the effects of the common trends often found in time series that have grown or decreased in a secular fashion. A second and more substantive reason is that those who have written about strategic behavior in the Realpolitik tradition have typically been concerned with prompt reaction by governments to changes in others' behavior. As Edward Gulick put it in describing eighteenth-century diplomacy, to "hold the balance" implied "a ready mobility in the direction of policy. Statesmen must be able to act quickly and expertly in cutting encumbering ties or making new ones as balance necessities dictate. . . ."29 Aaron Friedberg similarly argues that

As one actor moves and the other responds, both will have to make more or less continuous assessments of their opponent's intentions and capabilities in order, when necessary, to adjust their own plan of action. Strategic behavior therefore requires both that an actor be open to feedback and that it be able to modulate its own behavior as needed to achieve its objectives.30

In essence, those who make the exceptionalism argument claim that the United States has been unwilling or unable to act strategically in this sense.

**RESULTS**

In general, our data cast doubt on arguments that the United States government has behaved exceptionally abroad. Table 1 displays goodness of fit statistics for regression models of military expenditures for the United States and eight other countries. An amusing result of the analysis is that for the 1871–1914 period the United States actually appears to be the most responsive to other powers' military expenditures. In no period is there support for the notion that the United States is uniquely unresponsive to the armaments procurements of other powers.

Table 2 presents the findings of an analysis of naval and army expenditures for the 1871–1914 period. Since maritime powers may be responding more to naval programs than to military spending per se, while continental powers may act similarly with regard to spending on armies, this analysis is a useful safeguard against over interpreting the first set of findings. Moreover, since the United States is generally held to be less attached to the central system in the years before 1914 than afterward, the selection of time period can be said to have been biased toward finding results that distinguish U.S. behavior from that of the other countries. If the United States is not exceptional during this period, when would it ever be?

The general pattern of results in Table 2 provides no support for claims of American exceptionalism in this era. Like Britain, another maritime power,

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TABLE 1

Variance in Changes in Military Expenditures Explained by Lagged Changes in Other Countries' Military Expenditures (R^2)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia/USSR</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria-Hungary</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* The usual checks for autocorrelation, heteroskedasticity, and collinearity were performed. The results presented here are from conventional Ordinary Least Squares regressions.

the United States is considerably more responsive to changes in others' naval procurements than to changes in their army procurements. It is also noteworthy that the two most responsive powers—France with respect to its army and Austria-Hungary with respect to its navy—were in situations where they were being hard pressed by rising challengers. Responsiveness for such states is at a premium.

Table 3 reports goodness of fit statistics (the likelihood ratio) for multinomial logit regressions of changes in the level of diplomatic representation as a function of lagged changes in the level of other countries' representation. Here there is some support for the notion that the United States is not as responsive as other nations. In the interwar period, changes in U.S. diplomatic representation are the least responsive to changes in others' representation; in the 1871–1914 era the United States is the second least responsive. However, there are several reasons to be cautious about accepting this as evidence for even a weak form of exceptionalism. First, in the interwar period the appropriate data on British diplomatic representation is missing from the COW dataset. Because, in the pre-1914 era, the analysis found that changes in U.S. diplomatic representation

TABLE 2

Changes in Navy and Army Spending as a Function of Lagged Changes in Others' Navy and Army Spending, 1871–1914 (R^2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Navy</th>
<th>Army</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria-Hungary</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were particularly responsive to prior changes in British representation \( (p < .018) \),
the omission of the British data in the interwar period probably results in a
deterioration in model performance that hits the American results more strongly
than that of the other countries.

A second reason for caution is that although the Americans are the least
responsive in the interwar period, the difference between American and German
goodness-of-fit is trivial, and no one argues that the Germans were exceptional.
Likewise in the 1871–1914 period, the French appear even less responsive than
the Americans, and no one argues that the French were exceptional in this period
either.

A third reason for caution is that our test of exceptionalism is a bit restrictive.
We are essentially testing whether the United States is behaving like a good
follower country—not whether it is playing the role of leader. Countries that are
leaders might rationally choose in anticipation of how followers will react to
their choices, and in that sense be quite responsive to the international system.
However, the econometric tests we have presented do not provide for this possi-
bility. This is most likely to be a live issue in the post-1945 era (where data
problems preclude presenting any results), but less likely for the earlier periods,
where U.S. leadership (except perhaps in the New World) seems a very problem-
atic assumption to make. Of course, this assumption was seldom made before
1945.

As Table 4 indicates, there is somewhat more evidence that American alliance
behavior has been unusual, but this must be qualified by comparison to states
that were at least somewhat comparably placed geopolitically. We report alliance
activity only for the years between the Franco-Prussian War and the beginning
of World War II when there was no system-wide war. War years are omitted
because exceptionalist arguments stress aversion to peacetime alliances. After
the burst of alliance formation in the later 1940s and early 1950s, new alliances by
the powers that we examine are confined to a few agreements with less developed
countries. Because the alliance patterns of all the countries we study were essen-
TABLE 4
Total Alliances, Ententes, and Nonaggression Pacts
1871–1914 and 1919–1939

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Pacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia/USSR</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy/Sardinia</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prussia/Germany</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria-Hungary/Austria</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ottoman Empire/Turkey</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Initially frozen during the cold war, once again it is evident that Americans are not outliers.

It is clear from these data that, although the United States was indeed involved in exceptionally few foreign entanglements in this era, it is not such a large outlier when account is taken of the differences between continental and maritime powers. (Britain, the most alliance-prone of the three maritime countries, was a key player in the European central system and, therefore, had more reasons to interact with those on the continent.) If an aversion to alliances implies exceptionalism, maritime powers as a group are more prone to it than continental states. Still, these results provide the most compelling empirical support in this article for the claim of American exceptionalism.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

If exceptionalism does not imply exceptional behavior, it may not be a very interesting or important argument. We have looked for evidence that America is an outlier in the three areas emphasized by writers who have made the argument: arms procurement, diplomatic representation, and alliance participation. Only in the case of alliance involvement is the claim of American exceptionalism sustainable for the period prior to the cold war. While America minimized alliance commitments during peacetime before World War II, much the same could be said about Japan and, to a lesser extent, Britain, the other major maritime powers. When one considers as well the other dimensions of comparison—military expenditures and diplomatic representation—there is little evidence that U.S. external behavior has differed radically from other maritime powers.

Of course, the idea that states' external behavior reflects their geopolitical circumstances is not new. Realists have long claimed that the external environment rewards societies that adjust prudently to it.\(^1\) Even large states, for example,

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tend to specialize in land or sea power assets. Our comparison of U.S. naval and army procurement before World War I illustrates this and puts a new twist on the oft-stated U.S. distaste for large standing armies. Because Britain's navy had been her main asset in trying to put down the American colonial revolt, because allied naval power had greatly aided the Americans toward the end of the war, and because the new republic then sought to protect its vulnerable coasts from new threats, U.S. strategic thought from the beginning focused on navies. This predilection was reinforced because the United States also needed a fleet to protect its overseas trade and to conduct much of its domestic commerce, which was concentrated along the coasts. While navies were mistrusted throughout the agricultural sections of the United States for some time after the Revolution, armies were strongly mistrusted in all regions. Finally, because continental states share more land borders with others than maritime states, and because states' war participation is related to uncertainty, which increases with its number of land borders, land powers can be expected to join more defensive alliances than maritime powers to reduce the uncertainty.

Geographic placement and their own naval resources have usually allowed the maritime powers—Britain, the United States, and Japan—to avoid peacetime alliances. Until the twentieth century, for example, Britain's separation from the Eurasian continent allowed it to forego security commitments except in three situations: to fight an ongoing war, to prevent any single power from dominating the continent, and via the so-called two-power (force sizing) standard, to prevent itself from being outclassed at sea by a coalition of the next two strongest maritime powers, France and Russia. Britain's unprecedented peacetime alliance with Japan and the entente with France and Russia before World War I stemmed from a desire to neutralize lesser threats in order to deal with Germany. Similarly, the United States was also able to remain aloof from alliances, since it faced no threat on land after the French were defeated in Canada in 1763, and it had few strategic external interests before 1900. Even after that, arms control could plausibly have been thought to substitute for alliances by acting to reduce uncertainty about other states' behavior and by restraining what they could do. A similar argument applies to Japan.

It follows that U.S. alliance participation, while clearly low before World War II, may thus have been modal behavior for a well protected island nation—

similar, for example, to Japan’s—rather than exceptional. British thinking about alliance commitments during the nineteenth century also fits this pattern. Although long-time Prime Minister Lord Robert Cecil Salisbury saw France as a foe and Germany as a potential friend,

He wished an alliance with neither power, telling the German Ambassador 'Nous sommes des poissons' (We are fish) and that 'the sea and her chalk cliffs were England's best allies.' He understood both the advantages and weaknesses of sea power and once reminded Queen Victoria (who wanted him to do something about Turkish atrocities in Armenia): 'England's strength lies in her ships, and ships can only operate on the seashore or sea. England alone can do nothing to remedy an inland tyranny.' He described his policy as 'Splendid isolation' and 'the supremacy of the interests of England.'

In fact, the geographic underpinnings of American strategy before 1945 can be seen in reverse during the containment era. Then, because U.S. separation from Eurasia was in large part a strategic handicap, numerous alliances and forward-based troops were put in place to convince the world that separation did not imply aloofness, as it had before.

This interpretation clearly weakens the exceptionalist hypothesis. Indeed, while Stanley Hoffmann devotes over one hundred pages in a book on U.S. foreign policy to America's “national style,” he admits that “it would be easy to demonstrate that American foreign-policy moves are no more moral, display no more fervent idealism, and demonstrate no greater religion of law than the policy of others.” Yet the exceptionalist argument might be salvaged in a different form, as is suggested by Hoffmann's notion of foreign policy “style.” Rather than being atypical abroad, American leaders might use unusual internal justifications, perhaps through idiosyncratic symbols and metaphors. The language they use to legitimate their policies may have little geopolitical content, leaving only metaphors based on national self-image and values. Why would this be true? In any society, government builds support for its policies by linking them to general societal norms, usually through political symbols that have reference to deeply shared values. For several reasons, American foreign policy symbols seem unusually linked to domestic rather than external values. Because U.S. society was formed before the American state existed in a system of competitive states and was held together by shared ideas rather than religion or blood, American mass society has had little use for the symbols of competitive nationalism in the Old World sense or the geopolitical concepts that went with it. Lacking the shared cognitive maps that other peoples develop to deal with

38 Hoffmann, *Gulliver's Troubles*, 126.
tangible disputes over territory and resources, Americans typically do not grasp the politics, history, and social forces out of which foreign policy is typically made elsewhere. U.S. foreign behavior abroad is thus justified through general formulas and slogans, which are present in exaggerated form or "oversold" because the polity rejects the notion of "reason of state." Given the black-and-white character of the domestic value system, it is easier to blame failure on malevolent foreign or domestic actors than to adjust the beliefs.

If we assume that U.S. internal foreign policy justifications are different in this sense from others, as an abundance of literature suggests, why is American behavior not more atypical as well? We briefly suggest two possibilities, both of which deserve fuller exploration elsewhere.

Perhaps foreign policy justifications do constrain behavior, if only in some settings, because the audiences that attend to official rationales demand consistent expectations. Paul Anderson argues that a policy rationale must conform to precedents acceptable within the government (and perhaps the wider policy community of pundits and ins-and-outers), since virtually all actors agree on the need to maintain desired and stable expectations abroad. If this is true, contradicting the public rationale for a policy violates a key internal norm.

This in turn raises a large puzzle: why is U.S. behavior less clearly different from other nations than the value-laden public justifications imply? Perhaps U.S. leaders were clever enough during the years of cold war and American economic hegemony to find idealistic interpretations for a variety of actions, as Richard Nixon did when he characterized his relatively flexible détente diplomacy in Wilsonian terms. It is also highly likely that anticommunism often served moralistic as well as geopolitical purposes. Testing this hypothesis would require a close look at the substance and political efficacy of the justifications.

An alternative view is that any contradiction between public rhetoric and American behavior presents no puzzle at all, since justifications do not necessarily constrain what the government actually does. Murray Edelman claims that different constituencies want different goods from government; some are satisfied with "symbolic reassurance," while others demand "tangible resources" or "substantive power." If this is true, or might be so under certain conditions, political leaders might try to segment their public communications according to the demands of the audience, with no expectation that the rationale will in every case reflect or affect substance. American religious groups, for instance, might be

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43 Hoffmann, Gulliver's Troubles, 138.


45 Stanley Hoffmann, "Will the Balance Balance at Home?" Foreign Policy 7 (Summer 1972): 77.

interested in either humanitarian or deeply ideological symbols and some token gestures to support them, while portions of the business community might be interested in a different agenda pursued more regularly but quietly. If Edelman is right, the former could have what they want without necessarily contradicting the message sent to other groups. It is not inconsistent for Americans to mistrust militarism and yet to produce a military establishment of high stature and accomplishment.

This second possibility raises a host of issues. In cases where the agendas of different domestic audiences are not so separable, what would allow decision makers to both articulate the principles and symbols demanded by some audiences while acting inconsistently for others? How can they segment audiences so as to offer justifications that will bring them maximum political support? In short, how can one act inconsistently with a principle without having to concede that it is being violated?

While we cannot address these questions here, the force of our argument is that they should be examined. If America is not truly exceptional abroad, something about the public message that surrounds its behavior is unusual. The link between those messages, its actual behavior abroad under different conditions, and the bases of domestic support for it merit further scholarly work.
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