

Debating American Exceptionalism

Empire and Democracy in the Wake
of the Spanish-American War

Fabian Hilfrich



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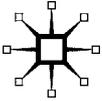
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For Margaret and Rebecca

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Abbreviations

AAIL	American Anti-Imperialist League
AHR	American Historical Review
AIL	Anti-Imperialist League
AILB	Anti-Imperialist Leaflets and Broad­sides
ARR	American Review of Reviews
CAIL	Central Anti-Imperialist League (Chicago)
CR	Congressional Record
DH	Diplomatic History
FRUS	Paper Relation to the Foreign Relating of the United States
GPO	Government Printing Office
HM	Harper's Monthly
HW	Harper's Weekly
JAH	Journal of American History
MVHR	Mississippi Valley Historical Review
NEAIL	New England Anti-Imperialist League
PHR	Pacific Historical Review
PSQ	Political Science Quarterly
PSSR	Philippine Social Science Review
RNC	Republican National Committee

Introduction

Why do we think that we can rule [Iraq]? This is American imperialism you're hearing up here. And that hasn't worked and it will never work.

Senator Mike Gravel (2007)

This is not an empire. We don't go out and occupy a territory for personal gain. We're there because we know that if we change the situation on the ground in a place like Iraq or Afghanistan, that freedom is the best antidote to terror, that democracies don't produce and breed the kind of terrorist extremists that hit us on 9/11.

Vice President Richard Cheney (2004)¹

Since the United States was founded in opposition to the British Empire, “empire” has fascinated and frightened Americans with its ambivalent connotations of power and prestige, doom and decline. As ex-Senator Mike Gravel and former Vice President Richard Cheney did on the occasion of the Iraq War, policymakers usually reject the label, whereas dissenters seek to apply it.² These uses of the “empire” epithet indicate that debates on foreign policy transcend their narrow confines and turn into “great debates” about American values and America’s purpose and role in the world. As David Levy has remarked, these are “moment[s] of critical and traumatic *self*-scrutiny for the American people” even though their contents relate to *foreign* policy questions.³ This solipsist quality renders the analysis of such debates particularly rewarding because the debates illustrate differing conceptions of American nationalism, of what the United States is or ought to be.

The debate at the heart of this study became “officially” known as the “imperialism debate,” in which Americans discussed the desirability of acquiring former Spanish colonies occupied in the 1898 war against Spain—most notably Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Among all “great debates” on foreign policy, from the war with Mexico in 1848 to the recent one in

Iraq, it alone revolved around colonial expansion, the acquisition of overseas territory, that no one considered integrating into the American state. Like the other debates, however, the one on imperialism was characterized by a surprising degree of consensus on American national identity and by disagreements about that identity's implications for the conduct of foreign policy. Imperialists *and* anti-imperialists justified their foreign policy strategies by appealing to American exceptionalism, the belief that the United States was unique as the first nation founded on democratic ideals rather than on historical boundaries or ethnic cohesion.

At first glance, this seems paradoxical: a divisive debate was based on a fundamental consensus. This empirical observation prompted one analytical interest of this study: an inquiry into why exceptionalism is malleable enough to accommodate different foreign policy strategies. On one level, imperialists and their opponents interpreted the mandates of exceptionalism differently: While imperialists claimed that being unique endowed the United States with a special *right* to actively proselytize in the name of democracy, their opponents insisted that exceptionalism bestowed a *duty* to refrain from aggressive behavior in the international arena. Democracy, they maintained, would be more appropriately spread by passive example, by perfecting it at home so that the nation would shine as John Winthrop's proverbial "city upon a hill," enticing others to voluntarily emulate the U.S. example.

Taken by itself, this observation adds little to the historiography of American foreign relations, exceptionalism, and the idea of a global mission. Many scholars have pointed to the "exegetic dilemma" of trying to deduce a specific foreign policy from exceptionalism. While the *ends*, the global triumph of American-style democracy, are usually agreed upon, exceptionalism does not stipulate the *means* for implementation. Therefore, completely diverse strategies, such as an active crusading mission and a complete abstention from world affairs for fear of being "contaminated," have traditionally been legitimized by appeals to exceptionalism.⁴

Although these assertions are undoubtedly correct, I claim that the concept's elasticity is also based on its dialectic internal structure. In postulating that the United States is unique because of its democratic founding, exceptionalism combines the universal and inclusive element of "democracy" with the particularist and exclusive element of "nation." Accordingly, in the second part of this study (chapters 5–7), I intend to demonstrate that the debaters exploited this tension. The imperialists emphasized the national element, whereas their opponents insisted on the democratic aspects of American exceptionalism.⁵

This distinction might seem anachronistic, since exceptionalism *as a whole* forms the basis of American nationalism. Therefore, it is necessary to define

the “national element” as it is used in this study. Scholars of nationalism distinguish between “open” and “closed” as well as “civic” and “ethnic” nationalisms. While closed nationalisms define the in-group and its territory according to ethnic and cultural characteristics, which are supposedly fixed or have “naturally” *emerged* in the dark reaches of history, the open type assumes that the nation was deliberately *created*. An individual becomes a citizen by consent, and his or her loyalty extends more to the nation’s political order than to its territorial domain. Whereas civic nationalism requires rational individual choice, ethnic nationalism appeals to a pre-rational and communal sense of belonging and obedience.⁶

Although American nationalism has traditionally been identified with the civic type, traces of the ethnic variety can be found throughout U.S. history. Nativism, anti-immigration fervor, and racism illustrate that some Americans have conceived of theirs as a closed nation, endowed with a specific cultural and ethnic character that had to be protected against outsiders. Not surprisingly, strains like external war and internal debate elicited rhetoric that is more closely associated with ethnic and chauvinist nationalism than with the civic variety. When I speak of the “national element,” therefore, I discuss attitudes commonly associated with this closed nationalism.

Finally, since “democracy,” the other ingredient of exceptionalism, is a notoriously open-ended concept, the national creed contained additional potential that imperialists and their opponents could exploit. Even if imperialists relied on more nationalist rhetoric, they were not willing to forsake the nation’s democratic heritage and ideals. On the contrary, all debaters insisted that their respective foreign policy strategies best represented and propagandized American democratic ideals. The first part of this study (chapters 1–4) will, therefore, focus on how imperialists and anti-imperialists exploited the malleability of “democracy” to claim that their recommendations were advancing the cause of democracy abroad.

This multi-pronged approach to the American imperialism debate around 1900 transcends the immediate historical example to address enduring questions about U.S. foreign policy, political culture, and discourse. By illustrating how exceptionalism was exploited by advocates and opponents of an aggressive policy overseas, this case study indicates why the belief in American uniqueness has survived strong challenges and international setbacks. Exceptionalism has received several premature obituaries, most famously by Daniel Bell after the Vietnam War, but again recently by Andrew Bacevich during the Iraq War. William James did the same after the Philippine-American War by telling an anti-imperialist audience that the national belief “that we were of a different clay from other nations” had turned out to be nothing but an “idle dream! pure [*sic*] fourth of July

fancy.”⁷ Yet, as we can readily observe, the belief in exceptionalism remains alive and well.

In relation to nationalism studies, these observations confirm that we do not usually find a clear-cut juxtaposition of closed and civic conceptions of the nation. Both forms coexist even in one nation. In relation to democracy studies, debaters, unsurprisingly, did not adhere to rigid theories when they argued about empire. Instead, they “used” democracy pragmatically, exploiting theoretical ambiguities and contradictions to legitimize their foreign policy views. Nevertheless, their discussions about the relevance of American democracy in an international context alluded to basic dilemmas of democratic theory and practice, among them questions of how culturally dependent democracy is as a form of government, whether democracy should be more concerned with safeguarding the rights of the individual or of the community, and whether it is more adequately expressed in a people’s mentality or in a nation’s institutions.

Some readers might question the approach to the imperialism debate through the prism of exceptionalism because they see little value in the question of whether the United States is or ever was unique. This question, however, is not the focus of this study. I am concentrating on exceptionalism because it was, empirically speaking, the most important reference point of the debaters’ arguments, although this debate also had inter- and transnational features.⁸ In addition, I am interested in the reasons why this foreign policy discourse remains so stable, even in the face of doubts and defeat. Finally, the internal makeup of exceptionalism—that is, its democratic contents and the inherent tension between the terms “nation” and “democracy”—helps structure this investigation.

* * *

While the analytical framework of this study focuses on the “timeless” nature of American foreign policy discourse, it is equally crucial to anchor the debate in its unique historical context. This is, after all, the first in-depth study of the imperialism debate. Particularly in the 1960s, inspired by the contemporary example of antiwar activism, scholars analyzed anti-imperialist arguments and strategy, but there is a dearth of studies comparing anti-imperialism with its binary opposite.⁹ Previously, scholars were more interested in why an “anti-colonial” nation embarked on colonial adventures in Asia and the Caribbean. While traditionalists have explained this period as an “aberration,” in which “the United States had greatness thrust upon it,”¹⁰ revisionists have interpreted the policies as an integral part of a long-standing attempt to achieve *economic* global hegemony. They speak of a “tradition” of American

expansionism, which extends back to the revolution and forward into the twentieth century. Therefore, they belittle the imperialism debate as one on means rather than ends, with the anti-imperialists as the cleverer champions of “informal” economic empire—a path the United States supposedly followed subsequently.¹¹

Belief in the continuity of American “imperialism” is shared by a third group of scholars, whose research agenda has been cultural and who are preoccupied with American attitudes toward other peoples *and* domestic minorities. By breaking down the boundary between the foreign and the domestic, these historians undermine the notion that nineteenth-century continental expansion was a “domestic” and therefore not an imperial(ist) venture. They highlight the continuity of racism at home and abroad. Initially, cultural historians focused on the attitudes of imperialists and on the impact of cultural concepts on policymaking. Most recently, they have turned their attention to colonial administration, whether it expressed particularly American ideas and values, and how colonial experiences impacted domestic practices. Most of these studies have not specifically addressed the imperialism *debate*. Nevertheless, Eric T. Love’s recent monograph on the role of race in earlier nineteenth-century discussions of overseas expansion has illuminated the multiple meanings of *one* cultural concept—race—for the discussion of empire. Love’s approach hints at the potential of a more comprehensive analysis of cultural and ideological concepts in the imperialism debate.¹²

His hypothesis (and its limitations) serve as a reminder of the historical contingency of such debates. He argues that the role of racism in facilitating overseas expansion has been exaggerated in the literature and that, on the contrary, attitudes toward race served as a deterrent *against* empire. Nevertheless, had Love extended his analysis beyond late 1898, he would have discovered that the role of racism in the debate on expansion changed, prompting many debaters to adjust their arguments, as the second chapter of this study illustrates.

Another example of the historical contingency of the imperialism debate is the relative importance of the “national element” in imperialist rhetoric. Even a superficial comparison with other foreign policy debates shows how much the imperialists emphasized the national unit as a value in itself. This was not only a logical consequence of advocating overseas expansion, but also dependent on a contemporary wave of intense nationalism, which was fed by internal and external sources. Internally, nationhood was celebrated as a means to reunite the country one generation after the Civil War, whereas externally, the United States followed a wave of nationalist fervor that also peaked in Europe at this time.

Historical contingency thus complements the “long view” that this study takes of the formulation and discussion of U.S. foreign policy. This dichotomous approach to the imperialism debate illustrates how cultural concepts shape a nation’s encounter with the outside world, how they condition responses to foreign policy challenges, and how, in turn, these challenges impact and change cultural attitudes. Ultimately, the object of this study is to show the enduring *and* contingent cultural backdrop against which diverse approaches to U.S. foreign policy develop and which they equally shape.

* * *

Geir Lundestad has written about the impact of exceptionalism on U.S. foreign policy: “While *other states had interests*, the United States had responsibilities. Its prime mission was nothing less than to save the world.”¹³ This recognition informs the perspective of this study and explains why I focus on those aspects of the debate that concerned American ideals and ideology and much less on specific disagreements about (narrowly defined) national interests and tactical preferences. This is a study of culture and its expression in rhetoric. “Culture” is not only a fashionable term, but also a slippery one. According to Akira Iriye, “culture in the study of international relations may be defined as the sharing and transmitting of consciousness within and across national boundaries, and the cultural approach as a perspective that pays particular attention to this phenomenon.”¹⁴ This definition is especially suitable because it reflects the shared belief in American exceptionalism and the way in which it shaped foreign policy views. With its inherent international relevance, encapsulated in the sense of mission, the belief in exceptionalism bridges the gap between the self and the other—the “within and across,” in Iriye’s definition—between the particular (“nation”) and the universal (“democracy”), and between the export of democracy and the impact of “imperialism” at home.

Since culture manifests itself as rhetoric in such a debate and since “experience is mediated by language,”¹⁵ it is appropriate to discuss another fashionable term, “discourse,” which culture has obscured in recent years. Like many terms derived from post-structuralist and post-modernist theory, discourse is no less slippery than culture. Following Michel Foucault, Gail Bederman has formulated a useful definition: “By ‘discourse,’ I mean a set of ideas and practices which, taken together, organize both the way a society defines certain truths about itself and the way it deploys social power . . . [T]his methodology does not differentiate between intellectual ideas and material practices.” While I am not advocating the ultimate consequence of this explanation, that our entire universe consists only of language,