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STILL EXCEPTIONAL?
AMERICA'S ROLE IN THE WORLD

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STILL EXCEPTIONAL? AMERICA'S ROLE IN THE WORLD

The jubilation across Europe occasioned by the 2008 election of Barack Obama was in large measure due to the widespread belief that Obama was quite close to Europeans in his values, sensibilities and world view. In these respects he was expected to be dramatically different from his predecessor, George W. Bush. What Obama wrote in his two biographies, *Dreams From My Father* (2004) and *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), what he said while a member of the United States Senate, and the criticisms and promises that he made during the 2008 campaign—including the speech that Obama gave at Berlin—together caused Europeans to expect that American foreign policy would change in important ways. In particular, Obama's emphasis on multilateralism, his frequent references to the necessity of resolving international conflicts through the machinery of the UN, his strong criticism of the war in Iraq and the Bush Doctrine of pre-emptive limitary force, and his promises to close the Guantanamo Bay detention camp and to end both extraordinary rendition and interrogation techniques that included waterboarding were all in accord with prevailing sentiments in most other democracies.

Obama, so it seemed to the populations and leaders of these other countries, did not begin from the premise that the United States was somehow exceptional when it came to its role and behaviour in the world affairs. Most Europeans found this to be reassuring. The following assessment from the German centre-

left newspaper, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, was fairly representative of Europeans' response to Obama's election:

> America's weaknesses were not only George W. Bush and his clique, but rather the intellectual position that spread throughout the country: an imperialist megalomania, a power trip, that didn't leave room for friends. It led the country to lose its attraction for the first time. Obama's greatest achievement is that he has reactivated this magnetism. Suddenly people across the world are looking benevolently at America, at this positive and dynamic society that allows so much freedom.

What is celebrated in this assessment of what the transition from Bush to Obama was likely to mean for the world is not the end of American leadership. Rather, what is welcomed is the end of "the imperialist megalomania, the power trip," the perception that Americans and those who take foreign policy decisions on their behalf do not care about the preferences and views of others, including their allies. At the same time there is an acknowledgment of America's "magnetism" and of the values and attributes that had traditionally caused Europeans to look to the United States for leadership. This sentiment was amplified in the reasons given for the awarding of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize to President Obama. The Nobel Committee's press release explained why, after only nine months in office, an honour that only two sitting presidents before him had received—Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—was merited by President Obama. "Only very rarely," the Committee said, "has a person to the same extent as Obama captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future. His diplomacy is founded in the concept that those who are to lead the world must do so on the basis of values and attitudes that are shared by a majority of the world's population." The "hope and change" that Obama had promised to Americans and to people throughout the world was, the Committee believed, the sort of leadership they wished to see from America. Obama was not awarded the prize because he was expected to preside over a diminished role for the United States in world affairs. Instead, he received it in the expectation that America's influence would rely more on values, cooperation and international consensus instead of on military force, sanctions and unilateral action.

Not everyone agrees that America has an exceptional, leading or indispensable role to play in world affairs.

Moreover, the manner in which America's past motives and influence have been understood ranges from adulation to outright condemnation. There is no agreement when it comes to the current or past causes and consequences of the United States' role in the world. What is undeniably true, however, is that no serious account of geopolitics since World War I is possible without the United States being very much at the centre of the story. America's influence in world affairs—for better or for worse, which is not the matter under consideration here—has been exceptional.

Not everyone agrees that America has an exceptional, leading or indispensable role to play in world affairs.

American exceptionalism in global affairs has origins that predate, by centuries, the country's emergence as the world's preeminent power. They reach back to the European colonization of what would become the United States and to the idea of America that developed in the Western mind. Indeed, long before the idea of America broke upon the general consciousness of the world, originally as a place to immigrate and eventually as a power whose military, movies, music, and money spanned the globe, European elites were aware of what they called the New World. *Mundis novis* and *de orbe novo* were the terms the educated literate classes in Western Europe used to describe the Americas after Christopher Columbus's voyages of discovery. The idea of America gripped the imaginations of both rulers and thinkers. Rulers envisioned it as a place rich in resources and territory that could add strength and grandeur to their empires; thinkers viewed it as a dramatic challenge to established ways of knowing about the human condition.

As J. Martin Evans argues in *America: The View from Europe* (1976), the discovery of the Americas challenged the notion of limitation, which was simply assumed to be a characteristic of the human condition. The discovery of America not only required that maps of the world be redrawn, but also that ideas about humankind be rethought and recentred. After Columbus it was no longer possible to contemplate the human condition and its possibilities without taking America into account. Thus, before America became a place to be fought over

and plundered by the Old World and a destination for its emigrants, it was already an idea. The mythic significance of America for the elite classes preceded its influence on the world stage.

The dominant narrative of America's significance in the world that emerged in the writings of John Winthrop, Richard Mather, William Penn and others is one of separation from Europe, a separation that was both physical and in terms of spirit and identity. And insofar as Europe was the only frame of reference for white colonial Americans of the 17th and 18th centuries, this separation was between them and the rest of the world. Many Europeans shared this view of America. It was seen as not merely an extension of European civilization in newly discovered and settled lands but, as John Locke famously wrote, a *tabula rasa* where new social and political arrangements and new ways of thinking to accompany them were possible.

The idea of America that developed among those for whom it was home, and in particular their thoughts about how they figured in the world and in world history, were shaped by religion, geography and culture. Refracted through the enormous changes that have taken place over five centuries of American history, these ideas continue to influence how contemporary Americans view their society's relationship to the rest of the world. Both the idea that America has a special mission in the world affairs and in human history, and a manner of thinking about America's relationship to the world that is insular may be found in the early colonial history of the United States and in the contemporary conversation on its foreign policies.

A Chosen People

The idea of mission or of a special destiny is a well known part of the American narrative. Indeed, it is central to what might be described as the country's foundation myth, which is powerfully influenced by the arrival of the Pilgrims on the Mayflower and the thousands of Puritans who followed them in the 17th century. That foundation myth was expressed by John Winthrop, governor of the Plymouth colony:

> We are entered into covenant with Him for this work. We have taken out a commission. The Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles. We have professed to enterprise these and those accounts, upon these and those ends. We have hereupon besought Him of

> favor and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath He ratified this covenant and sealed our commission, and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it; but if we shall neglect the observation of these articles which are the ends we have propounded, and, dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, and be revenged of such a people, and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.

Echoes of this idea of deliverance from persecution and of Providence's intention for those who made the voyage to America in search of freedom and a new beginning are found throughout American history down to the present day. "No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand which conducts the affairs of men more than those of the United States," said Washington in his First Inaugural Address. "Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency." The doctrine of Manifest Destiny that powerfully influenced 19th century American thinking about the country's future was premised on the belief that the American continent had been "allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" (O'Sullivan 1845, 5). The novelist Herman Melville concurred, writing that "We Americans are the peculiar, the chosen people—the Israel of our time." In Lincoln's Gettysburg Address he indicates very clearly that what was at stake was not merely whether America would fail as a country, but "that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth." Woodrow Wilson's 2 April, 1917 address to Congress, requesting a declaration of war against Germany, expressed this notion that America had a special, providential responsibility to make the world safe for democracy. "The day has come," he said, "when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other." This idea is very clearly set forward in John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address, where he states that "In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger." Kennedy goes on to declare that, "The energy, the faith,

the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it. And the glow from that fire can truly light the world."

THE IDEA THAT AMERICA HAD SOME SPECIAL ROLE TO PLAY AS THE PROTECTOR OF DEMOCRACY AT HOME AND ABROAD WAS RIDICULED BY CRITICS AS BEING BOTH DELUSIONAL AND CAPITALIST PROPAGANDA.

Under Ronald Reagan this narrative of a special destiny, whose roots go back to the founding of America, was undiminished. It was not, however, uncontested. The Vietnam War had opened a wide and acrimonious rift in American society, leaving as one of its major legacies a view of the United States as an imperialist power not particularly different from those before it. The idea that America had some special role to play as the protector of democracy at home and abroad was ridiculed by critics as being both delusional and capitalist propaganda. The rhetoric of the Reagan era and the image of America that he and his supporters projected represented a return to this narrative. We will see that, although contested, this self-image continues to be very powerful in the United States.

Insularity

The American self-image also includes an idea of separation from the rest of the world and its problems. "The American attitude toward foreign nations, foreign people, and foreign things," wrote John Steinbeck in 1966, "is closely tied historically to our geographical position and our early history on this continent" (383). Steinbeck called this attitude insularity, not isolationism. His choice of word was apt, although isolationism is the world more often used to characterize a tendency in American opinion and foreign policy to be wary of involvement in quarrels between other nations. The period between the Senate's rejection of the Treaty of Versailles and membership in the League of Nations and the United States' entry into World War II in 1941 is held up as an example of this tendency, whose roots go back to George Washington's 1796 farewell address. The years after American withdrawal from Vietnam are often described as ones of disengagement, during

which public opinion and a large part of the foreign policy community were disinclined to see the United States become involved in conflicts abroad and rejected the ambitious internationalist vision that had been so influential during the first two decades of the Cold War.

But disengagement, much less isolationism, were no longer options by this point in American history. Despite the shadow cast by the Vietnam War—which continues to function as a sort of cautionary tale in the American conversation on global affairs—both Democratic and Republican administrations were willing to use military force abroad on several occasions after the defeat in Southeast Asia. The 1991 Gulf War and the 1999 U.S.-led NATO mission in Kosovo were the two most prominent instances of this before the mission in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, and despite these projections abroad of American military power, it was usual to think of American public opinion as isolationist in the decades preceding the attacks of 9/11. Important elements within both of the political parties shared this general aversion to engagement abroad.

The isolationist policies of American governments and sympathetic tendencies reflected in public opinion during much of American history are linked to what Steinbeck described as insularity. This insularity is a sentiment born of geography and history. The physical separation of America from the rest of the world was obvious enough. Buffered on both the east and west by vast oceans that, until the 20th century, took weeks to cross, it was natural that Americans thought of themselves as blessed by geography. "Kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from one-quarter of the globe," was how Jefferson expressed this in his first inaugural address. One detects in his words more than relief that America did not have the Old World's quarrels on its doorstep and that the country's enemies would face a formidable challenge simply to reach America's shores. There is also, and significantly, a sense that the separation is ordained by History. Others before and after Jefferson would have been inclined to attribute it to Providence and the hand of God. Jefferson's religious views were less orthodox than those of most of his contemporaries, but the same notion of deliverance and of America's special mission in world history are evident in what Jefferson says about the significance of America's geographical separation from the world. Few grand ideas were more common in 18th century America than the belief in the moral superiority of the society being created in the New World, made possible by the physical distance between America and the known world.

Steinbeck argues that the sense of being "kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean" from the rest of the world and its problems was no longer part of the American imagination by the 1960s. The United States had sent troops and treasure abroad in two World Wars, through the Marshall Plan, the Korean War and in maintaining permanent bases across the world. Steinbeck heard President Kennedy's powerful commitment to American leadership in the world and both wrote and worried about his country's deepening engagement in Vietnam. He was witness to the emergence of the United States as not only the world's most prosperous country, a distinction that it already held by the early years of the 20th century, but also the unrivalled leader among democratic nations and a cultural power, *sans pariel*, on the world scene. For all of these reasons he believed that the insularity that had long characterized American thinking was finished.

But he was wrong. Investments, missiles and Hollywood's popularity abroad certainly made America more engaged with the world. But Americans continued to think of themselves and their country in an insular and even parochial manner until the reality of how little geographical separation now matters was brought home by the attacks of 9/11. Commenting on what she perceived to be Americans' "excessive" reaction to these attacks, Nobel Prize-winning British author Doris Lessing (2002) observed that, "[Americans] seem to themselves as unique, alone, misunderstood, beleaguered….The judgment 'they had it coming,' so angrily resented, is perhaps misunderstood." How should Americans have understood this judgment? "What people felt," Lessing continues, "was that Americans had at last learned that they are like everyone else, vulnerable to the snakes of Envy and Revenge, to bombs exploding on a street corner….They say themselves that they have been expelled from their Eden. How strange they should ever have thought they had a right to one" (54).

Strange or not, Lessing is right that Americans' sense of being "kindly separated by nature," as Jefferson put it, from an occasionally nasty and hostile world, was shattered by the attacks of 9/11. Psychologically, the impact was far greater than the 1941 Japanese attack on American forces at Pearl Harbor, the "day of infamy" to which it was so often compared. The attacks of 9/11 were witnessed by millions of Americans who watched live on their televisions as the second plane sliced through the South Tower of the World Trade Center and who watched the collapse of the two towers in what doubtless seemed to many more Spielberg than reality.

This fact alone gave the 9/11 attacks an emotional immediacy that newspaper and magazine photos and the newsreel footage of Pearl Harbor shown at cinemas did not have for that earlier generation of Americans. But even more important was the fact that 9/11 was an attack on American soil. Indeed, not just any American soil, it was an attack on New York and the Pentagon, iconic representations of American power and central to the American imagination. The rapid creation of a new Department of *Homeland Security*—Americans had not been in the habit of referring to their country as the homeland, fatherland or motherland as is typical in some countries—was a clear and direct reaction to the outraged sense that Americans' *home* had been violated. Their vulnerability, as Lessing observes, was exposed in a manner and to a degree that was unimaginable to most Americans before 9/11. This event ended their insularity. The fact that for decades millions of Americans had been travelling across the world and that CNN and their computers allowed them to see what was happening in Mumbai and Milan as it was happening had reminded Americans that they were part of the world. But all of this travel and mediated images on their screens had not persuaded them that they were personally and directly vulnerable to the dangerous and devastating events that happened elsewhere.

"They say themselves that they have been expelled from their Eden." This too gets at a crucially important aspect of 9/11 as it relates to American exceptionalism and the country's role in world affairs. The insularity that has for centuries been part of how Americans have tended to see their relationship to the rest of the world and its troubles has important religious and utopian dimensions. From the arrival of the Pilgrims, the idea that Providence has a special design for Americans and that, as Melville put it, Americans are the Israelites of modern times, has been an important strand in the national narrative. This has sometimes been expressed with clear religious fervor, as in the following passage from a speech by Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana, one of America's first self-conscious imperialists, just after the defeat of Spain in the Philippines:

> …We will not renounce our part in the mission of our race, trustee, under God, of the civilization of the world. And we will move forward to our work, not howling out regrets like slave whipped to their burdens, but with gratitude for a task worthy of our strength, and thanksgiving to Almighty God that He has marked us as His chosen people, henceforth to lead in the regeneration of the world.

This may not sound like the voice of insularity. It is a long way from Washington's warning against foreign entanglements, Jefferson's thankfulness for America's physical separation from the rest of the world, or even from President James Monroe's declaration that "With the movements in this [western] hemisphere we are of necessity more immediately connected…[and] we should consider any attempt on [the part of European powers] to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety." But the insularity born with the Pilgrims and reflected in the ideas of America's founders was not merely about the felicity of geographic separation. It was also about the providential mission of America, its role in world history and the idea of Americans as a chosen people. These aspects of insularity, of America and Americans following a separate path from that of the Old World, survived after the course of history had rendered irrelevant America's geographic isolation.

Edens and utopias are ideals of perfection, free of disorder, unhappiness and pain. To suggest that Americans believed themselves to live in a sort of Eden, as Lessing says was true of Americans before 9/11 shattered this illusion, is not to say that sane people truly believed that they lived in a perfect society. But most Americans probably believed that their country was immune to the sort of danger and turmoil that they could see nightly on their television screens and that they associated with places "over there." Indeed, "Over There: How America Sees the World," was the title of a 2003 issue of *Granta*, published just after the invasion of Iraq. Here is what its Scottish editor, Ian Jack, said about what he, along with Lessing, believed to be the Eden mindset of Americans:

> …Anyone who knows America will also know that many and perhaps most of its people seem to believe that they have got life "sorted;" that their way of living and thinking is the most perfect to be attained on this earth; that other ways are inferior; that theirs is the model to be copied everywhere else. Increasingly, there seems an almost religious dimension to U.S. citizenship, not just because America is a remarkably Christian state led by a man who peppers his rhetoric with the words "good" and "evil", but because the sheer fact of being American is for many Americans to be part of an evangelical, patriotic faith—to be one of the elect, to be one of the saved (7).

It is not necessary that Jack be absolutely correct in his contention that most Americans believe "that their way of living and thinking is the most perfect attained on earth" or that his claim that "there seems an almost religious dimension to U.S. citizenship" be beyond dispute. It is enough that these observations fairly describe the thinking on many, if not most, Americans and of a significant portion of opinion leaders and political decision makers in the United States. They certainly pass this test. Even the language of Senator Beveridge, minus the Kiplingesque reference to race, continues to have a constituency in America. In Sarah Palin's *America by Heart: Reflections on Family, Faith and Flag* (2010), the former Republican vice-presidential candidate and a favourite of the populist Tea Party movement never uses the words "chosen people," as Senator Beveridge did. But she very clearly believes this to be historically accurate and a premise that American leaders should embrace.

Any number of America's prominent and influential radio talk show hosts, including Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Mark Levin and Glen Beck deliver the America-the-exceptional message on a daily basis.

Palin is far from alone in this belief. Any number of America's prominent and influential radio talk show hosts, including Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Mark Levin and Glen Beck deliver the America-the-exceptional message on a daily basis. Former secretary of education under Ronald Reagan and drug czar under George H. W. Bush, William Bennett, delivers the message in a more philosophical key—he has a Ph.D in philosophy—on his morning radio program and in his many books, including *America: The Last Best Hope* (2006). The list of prominent politicians, not all of whom are Republicans, who embrace and express this message is very long. It may not be subversive to voice doubt about whether the United States really has a special mission that only it can fulfill in world affairs. But suspicion that one harbours such doubts can be enough to put a politician on the defensive.

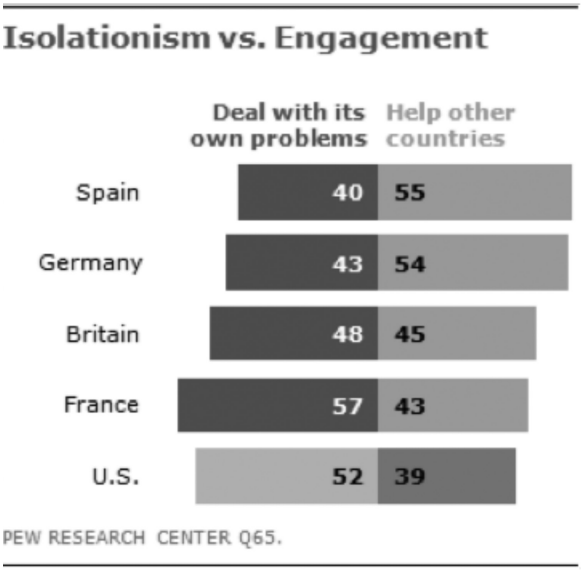
Public Opinion and America's Role in the World

Do average Americans, those for whom the world beyond their country's borders rarely intrudes upon their consciousness except at moments of crisis, believe that the United States is destined to play a unique role in world affairs? Do Americans see the world differently from their counterparts in Germany, France, Canada or Japan? Is there, in short, evidence of American exceptionalism in the attitudes and beliefs of the general public?

The evidence is mixed. The caricature of isolationist Americans who mistrust the UN, oppose aid sent overseas and want as little to do with the rest of the world as possible is false. According to a 2010 survey conducted for Pew's Global Attitudes Project, Americans are as likely as citizens in other rich democracies to agree that their country "should help other countries deal with their problems" (see Figure 1). Another survey, carried out in 2008 when public dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq was deep and wide, found that about half of Americans agreed with the statement that their country should be actively engaged in world affairs, 48 percent choosing 8-10 on a 10-point scale where 1 signified "not at all engaged" and 10 signified "very actively engaged " (see Table 1) (Greenberg 2008, 8). And according to data collected by the World Values Survey, Americans are no more or less likely than their counterparts in Germany and the Netherlands to express confidence in the United Nations (WVS 2006).

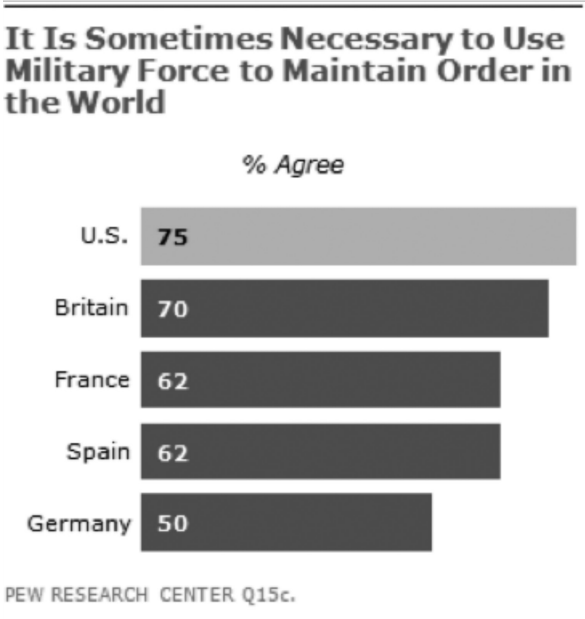
At the same time, Americans are less likely than the citizens of other rich democracies to believe that global climate change is a serious problem (Pew 2010:Q45,146). They are also more likely to agree with the statement that "Sometimes military force is necessary to maintain order in the world" (see Figure 2). Americans are also more likely to say that they would be willing to fight for their country, although in the latest round of the WVS they were not more likely to give this response than Canadians, the French and Britons. The United States is not a member of the International Criminal Court, but when it comes to the question of whether national governments or the United Nations should handle human rights problems, Americans are more likely than some western populations to insist on national sovereignty and less likely than the citizens of some other countries (WVS 2006).

Figure 1



Pew Research Center, Global Attitudes Project. 2011. American Exceptionalism Subsides: The American-Western European Values Gap. 17 November at www.pewglobal.org

Figure 2



Pew Research Center, Global Attitudes Project. 2011. American Exceptionalism Subsides: The American-Western European Values Gap. 17 November at www.pewglobal.org

Table 1
Faith and Perceptions of America's Impact and Proper Engagement in the World

	Positive/Negative presence*		Level of engagement^	
	Positive (6-10)	Negative (1-5)	8-10	10
Total	***49***	***49***	***48***	***24***
Traditional Catholic	53	40	50	23
Mainline Protestant	45	52	50	27
Evangelical	58	40	49	25
Liberal Catholic	37	61	48	15
Non-religious	45	54	46	22

** Positive/Negative Presence Scale: Please rate whether you believe the United States has a negative or positive presence in the world on a scale of one to ten, where one is a very negative presence and ten is a very positive presence.*
^ Engagement Scale: On a scale of one to ten, how actively engaged in world affairs should the United States be, where one is not at all engaged and ten is very actively engaged in world affairs?

Source: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner. 2008. Religion and America's Role in the World. 22 October.

So the picture is mixed. But on the whole, Americans appear to be more attached to the idea of national sovereignty and resistant to circumstances and institutions that might limit it than are the citizens of other rich democracies. The unwillingness of the United States to join the International Criminal Court, its failure to ratify the Kyoto Accord on climate change, the fact that even under Bill Clinton, a president whose principles favoured multilateralism, his administration did not sign the International Ban on Landmines, and the detention of enemy combatants at Guantanamo Bay under Presidents Bush and Obama in the face of intense and sustained criticism from most of America's western allies are all pointed to as evidence that the United States and its people remain tethered to a notion of the nation-state and its sovereignty that has ceded ground in most of the democratic world. Related to this is greater skepticism in America when it comes to multilateral approaches to managing world affairs and a stronger constituency for unilateralism than is found in other western democracies.

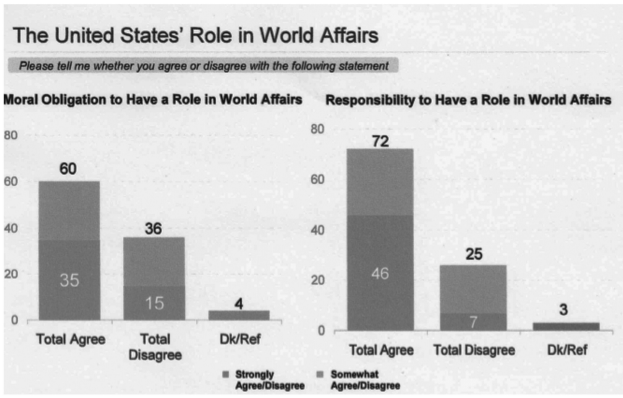
How different American public opinion is on these matters is difficult to say in more than a general manner. It is easy to overlook the opposition that continues to exist in many other western democracies to what some see as harmful encroachments on national sovereignty. The much discussed "democratic deficit" that is often said to characterize the politics and policy-making of the European Union is linked to the idea that the loss of national sovereignty associated with increasing EU integration also produces less responsiveness to national public opinion and local interests. The Dutch and French "Nos" in referenda on the proposed

Constitution of the European Union and then the Irish rejection of the Treaty of Lisbon (which led to a second referendum and to enormous pressure on Ireland to accept this particular step toward a more integrated Europe) were votes for national sovereignty and against the transfer of power to supra-national authorities. The 2009 elections to the European Parliament saw the Euro-skeptic candidates win about 20 percent of all the seats in the legislature. The influx of refugees from the Maghreb region of Northern Africa during the so-called Arab Spring of 2011 led to the abandonment by France and Italy of the ban on border controls between EU states within the Schengen zone. In short, national sovereignty is a long way from having been jettisoned by the populations and governments of the EU.

Nevertheless, the weight of the evidence strongly suggests that Americans and their political leaders have been less enthusiastic about strengthening the institutions of international governance where the price has been perceived to be a loss of national sovereignty and the ability to protect distinctly American interests. Part of the reason for this difference may be a simple, and perhaps reasonable, calculation that the United States is big enough and strong enough that it will often be able to protect its interests without having to rely on the cooperation of other states through international institutions and multilateral decision-making. But another part of the explanation may be cultural. A people that sees itself as "the world's greatest democracy"—words that no president or serious contender for the office has failed to utter in decades—and who are inclined to take their country's leadership in the world for granted and as something that is ordained by Providence, is not likely to take easily to calls that their country's policies bend to the interests of others and that the defense of their values and beliefs be subject to compromise.

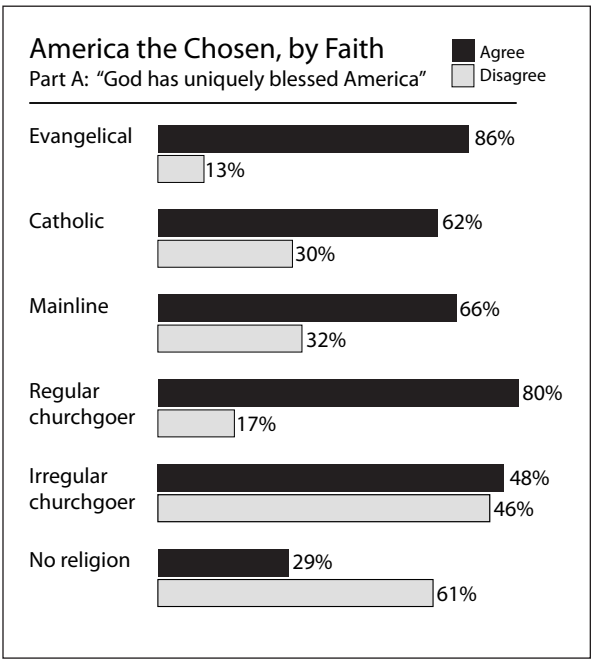
Are Americans such a people? There is evidence that they continue to believe, as did the Pilgrims and the founders of the Republic, that America has a special and divinely ordained role to play in the world. By a ratio of almost 2 to 1, Americans agree that the United States has a moral obligation to take a leadership role in world affairs. They are even more likely to agree that God has uniquely blessed America and that the United States should set an example as a Christian nation. Even among Americans who do not belong to a religious community, close to one-third agree that God has uniquely blessed their country and that it should set an example as a Christian nation (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3



Source: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner. 2008. Religion and America's Role in the World. 22 October.

Figure 4



Source: Adapted from Greenberg Quinlan Rosner. 2008. Religion and America's Role in the World. 22 October.

The gap between the values and beliefs of Americans and those of the citizens of other western democracies is greatest in matters of faith. This has important consequences for how Americans see their role in the world. As Figure 4 shows, in all of America's major religious communities a clear and in some cases an overwhelming majority of believers agree that God has

uniquely blessed America and also that their community should set the example as a Christian nation. Those who say that they belong to a faith community but who do not attend church regularly, and to an even greater degree among those who say that they do not belong to a religion, are much less likely to hold these views.

Interestingly, and perhaps unexpectedly, this widespread belief in America's exceptional role in the world—we might, with some caution, go so far as to describe it as belief in America as a chosen nation—does not appear to be matched by similar levels of confidence in the superiority of American culture. Most Americans disagree with the statement, "Our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others." Only among Evangelicals is there a slight margin in support of this claim (Greenberg 2008; Figure 7). Religious conservatism, i.e. being an Evangelical or a traditional Catholic, is associated with a greater likelihood that one supports a high level of American engagement in world affairs and that one judges America's presence in the world to be positive. Liberal Catholics are the least likely to be strongly supportive of American involvement abroad and also the most likely to believe that America's presence in the world is mainly negative (see Table 1).

Does the fact that most Americans agree that their country has been uniquely blessed by God and that it should set an example as a Christian nation mean that the critics of American foreign policy, those who accuse it of being too often arrogant and insensitive toward the views and interests of other countries, are right? And to the extent that Americans' belief in their exceptionalism on the world stage may be linked to their faith, is there truth in the depiction of the United States as a sort of crusader nation, bent on imposing its standards of right and wrong, of good and evil, on the rest of the world?

From Chosen People to Indispensable Nation to Default Power?

American foreign policy is shaped by a number of factors, public opinion being an important one. But public opinion is certainly not always the most significant determinant of policy. The influence of Americans' belief that their national story and role in the world are exceptional operates mainly at the macro-level. It shapes the way in which Americans and their leaders see their country's rightful place and proper impact in global affairs, but it is seldom the principle determinant at the micro-level of particular decisions and policies. Faith in American exceptionalism shapes the public

conversation and may be a standard against which the words and character of leaders and the policies of governments are judged.

Part of this faith involves a conviction, perhaps stronger in the past than in recent years, that people throughout the world envy Americans and would choose, if given the opportunity, to immigrate to America. Of course there is abundant and undeniable evidence that, historically, America has been the greatest magnet for immigrants that the world has known. Between 1820 and 2010 roughly 73 million people (Immigration and Naturalization Services) immigrated to the United States, the vast majority for economic reasons. In recent years an annual average of roughly 1 million immigrants have arrived in the country, a figure that includes only legal immigration and which therefore understates the actual influx of people. Emma Lazarus's invitation to "your poor, your huddled mass, yearning to be free"—or perhaps yearning to be better off materially might be closer to the mark—at the base of the Statue of Liberty, continues to be an apt characterization of how the citizens of many countries of the world continue to see America. The annual Green Card lottery conducted by INS and open to people throughout the world is entered by an estimated 8 million Bangladeshis. Bangladesh is one of the world's poorest countries and it seems that most of those who can afford the administrative fee to enter this lottery do so.

Asked in a 2003 BBC survey whether they thought that people from other countries would abandon their country for the United States, 96 percent of Americans said yes. It surely is true that many of America's leaders have agreed. President Lyndon Baines Johnson said that whenever he met non-Americans he was convinced that they longed for what America offered—its opportunities, wealth and freedom. Ronald Reagan certainly believed this to be true.

Presidents who govern during times when the beacon's light appears dimmer than usual pay a price. The presidency of Reagan's predecessor, Jimmy Carter, may be best remembered for what was widely seen as Carter's failure to uphold the idea of American exceptionalism. He asked his fellow citizens to turn down their home thermostats and use less energy in order to deal with rising oil and gas prices—restraint and diminished expectations in the world's richest country!—and spoke of Americans being in "a funk," forgetting or at least ignoring the fact that the language of Americans is optimism. The holding of 55 American hostages for

444 days in Iran was an important part of a narrative in which Carter was portrayed as a leader presiding over American decline.

Not surprisingly, his opponent in the 1980 campaign ran on the promise that he would restore America's greatness. Unused to feeling rather vulnerable and ordinary in a world that they dominated in the 20th century, Americans welcomed Ronald Reagan's message. Reagan was not the first president to quote John Winthrop's words about America being a "city on a hill." John Kennedy used these words in a speech that he gave in Boston just days before his famous 1961 Inaugural Address. But no presidency in modern times is a closely associated with this image of American exceptionalism and providential mission as that of Reagan, who characteristically changed the words to "a shining city on a hill," adding a bit of zip to Winthrop's quotation from the Bible.

Communism was discredited as an alternative to capitalism, as China took step after step toward economic liberalization, and the uni-polar world in which America towered over other countries economically, militarily and in terms of its cultural influence and prestige was born.

Reagan's vice-president and successor, George H. W. Bush, was never accused of having the least doubt about American exceptionalism. Indeed, the "new world order" that he proclaimed in a 1990 speech to Congress, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and leading up to the Gulf War, was one that he expected America to lead, without the inconvenience of a Cold War rival. But it was under his successor, Bill Clinton, that the full flowering of American triumphalism took place. Communism was discredited as an alternative to capitalism, as China took step after step toward economic liberalization, and the uni-polar world in which America towered over other countries economically,

militarily and in terms of its cultural influence and prestige was born. "The new American supremacy," observed French historian Jacques Portes (2008), "rests on both its unchallengeable military strength and on an economic dynamism that was uninterrupted during the 1990s. The consequence is a 'hyper-visibility' of the United States in the management of world affairs" (8). This triumph was perceived by some as the just reward reaped by a nation that had remained faithful to its superior values and founding spirit. America was, as Bill Clinton and his Secretary of State Madeline Albright declared self-evidently on more than one occasion, the *indispensable nation.* Albright's first and unscripted use of this term—a term whose spirit, if not the actual words, originated under Secretary of State Dean Acheson in the 1950s—is worth recalling. It was made before a town hall meeting broadcast by CNN on the campus of Ohio State University on 20 February, 1998. Albright was explaining the new dangers that existed in the post-Cold War world:

> …We are in a very different kind of a world where we are facing the danger of the spread of weapons of mass destruction. We had an initial example of this, as Secretary Cohen said, in Tokyo. We need to really put a stop to dictators who have weapons of mass destruction and threaten to use them against their people.
>
> I am very proud to represent the United States wherever I go. We are the greatest country in the world….And what we are doing is serving the role of the indispensable nation to see what we can do to make the world safer for our children and grandchildren, and for those people around the world who follow the rules.

There was no shortage of critics, at home and abroad, who saw in Albright's remarks just the latest confirmation of American arrogance. But there was also no doubt that the majority of Americans found most of the Secretary of State's remarks to be a simple statement of fact. The one point of contention, and it was and remains a very serious one among Americans, is whether being the indispensable nation necessarily obliges the United States to act as the world's policeman. Those who imagine that Americans are eager and even sometimes gleeful to drop bombs on foreign lands clearly do not understand or do not care to understand the ambivalence that characterizes American public opinion when it comes to that country's role in the world. "[The United States] is a fully-fledged, award-winning, gold-plated monster," wrote the late British playwright Harold Pinter in 2002.

"It has effectively declared war on the world. It knows only one language—bombs and death."

Since the 1991 Gulf War there have been six major instances involving the sustained use of American military force abroad, under the auspices of a UN resolution, as part of a NATO mission, or in alliance with other countries. They include the UN-sanctioned Gulf War; the NATO authorized bombing of Serbian territory of the former Yugoslavia in 1994-95 and in Kosovo and Serbia in 1999; the NATO mission in Afghanistan that began in 2001; the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, followed by regime change, that began in 2003; and the 2011 UN-sanctioned NATO mission in Libya. In only one of these cases, the invasion of Afghanistan, was American public opinion overwhelmingly supportive of the military option. The public's approval of what appeared to be quick and decisive victories with little loss of American life as in the 1991 Gulf War and the first two months of the 2003 campaign in Iraq, should not be interpreted as evidence that Americans either seek or even grudgingly accept the role of globo-cop. The Senate's 1990 resolution that authorized the president to use military force against Saddam Hussein in Kuwait passed by a single vote, reflecting the strong divisions that existed among Americans. In the case of Kosovo, there was strong public opposition to American involvement in a part of the world that was unfamiliar to most Americans and where it was not clear to most citizens that the United States had strategic interests at stake. In order to allay these widespread reservations the Clinton administration was forced to "sell" the mission as one that would not see American boots on the ground.

There is a famous song written by George M. Cohan during World War I, that includes the following chorus,

> Over there, over there,
> Send the word over there
> That the Yanks are coming,
> The drums rum tumming ev'rywhere,
> So prepare, say a prayer,
> Send the word to beware,
> We'll be over, we're coming over
> And we won't come back till it's over,
> Over there, over there.

Cohan's song was hugely popular during the war and has since been etched indelibly on the American imagination (not the least reason for which was James Cagney's portrayal of Cohan's life in the 1942 film *Yankee Doodle Dandy*). And there is no denying that Americans

have indeed gone "over there" in large numbers during the last century, many of whom did not return. But the reasons for their engagement abroad had far more to do with the circumstances of history than with an American desire to play the role of the world's enforcer, much less with a lust for aggression that is often attributed to at least some part of the American public. Statistics on public attitudes are of limited value here. What they tell us is that Americans appear to have more confidence in their armed forces than the citizens of other western democracies have in theirs, although the differences between Anglo-American populations are not very great. They also suggest that Americans are more likely to say that they would be willing to fight for their country, although again the differences between Anglo-American countries are not great and the citizens of some other countries, including Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands—the first two of which are usually thought of as paragons of pacifism—are about as likely or even more likely than Americans to say that they would fight for their country (WVS 1990, 2000 and 2006).

There is, however, a greater willingness among Americans and their leaders to use the military option in foreign affairs than exists in most other democracies. The notion that Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus, Robert Kagan's well-known thesis, does not lack for supporting evidence. At the same time, it is easily caricatured, as was true around the time of the 2003 invasion of Iraq when Europeans were jokingly portrayed on the popular television series, *The Simpsons*, in the form of French "cheese-eating surrender monkeys." Europeans returned the favor with unflattering and grotesquely simplified and distorted portrayals of George W. Bush and his henchmen or puppet masters (both images were common). The enormous anti-war demonstrations that took place in western European capitals during February 2003—there were indeed demonstrations in Washington and New York, but nothing approaching the scale of those in Berlin, Paris, London and Madrid—reinforced this image of militaristic America versus pacifist Europe.

The image, although often exaggerated, is not an illusion. In his last policy speech as Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates addressed an important element of this trans-Atlantic difference. He warned that NATO was in danger of drifting into irrelevance because of what Gates argued was the unequal sharing of burdens within the alliance:

> In the past, I've worried openly about NATO turning into a two-tiered alliance: Between members who specialize in 'soft' humanitarian, development, peacekeeping, and talking tasks, and those conducting the 'hard' combat missions. Between those willing and able to pay the price and bear the burdens of alliance commitments, and those who enjoy the benefits of NATO membership – be they security guarantees or headquarters billets – but don't want to share the risks and the costs. This is no longer a hypothetical worry. We are there today. And it is unacceptable.
>
> The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress – and in the American body politic writ large – to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense. Nations apparently willing and eager for American taxpayers to assume the growing security burden left by reductions in European defense budgets.

The immediate issue that gave rise to Gate's warning was the performance of the NATO mission in Libya. The Obama administration's decision not to assume a leadership role in this mission, leaving that role to Britain and France, very quickly exposed the inability of America's partners to achieve the alliance's goals without a robust American presence. "While every alliance member voted for the Libya mission," Gates observed, "less than half have participated at all, and fewer than a third have been willing to participate in the strike mission."

How has it come to pass that today the United States accounts for about 75 percent of total defense spending? The answer has relatively little to do with John Winthrop's "city on a hill" and Americans' continuing belief that their country is singularly blessed. It has quite a lot to do, however, with the arc of history and complex developments that led to American dominance on the world scene during the 20th century.

The story of how the United States emerged from World War II as the world's economic colossus and dominant military power is too well known to require retelling here. It was in the mutual interests of America and its allies that the United States shoulder much of the burden of western European defense during the Cold War. The reaction in

West Germany against the militarism that had contributed to the war, and continuing fears among its neighbours that German aggression needed to be contained, created limits on Germany's ability and willingness to take care of its own defense. This was also true, of course, in the case of Japan. Thus in both western Europe and in the Pacific the United States assumed the lion's share of responsibility for the defense of its interests and the interests and territories of its allies.

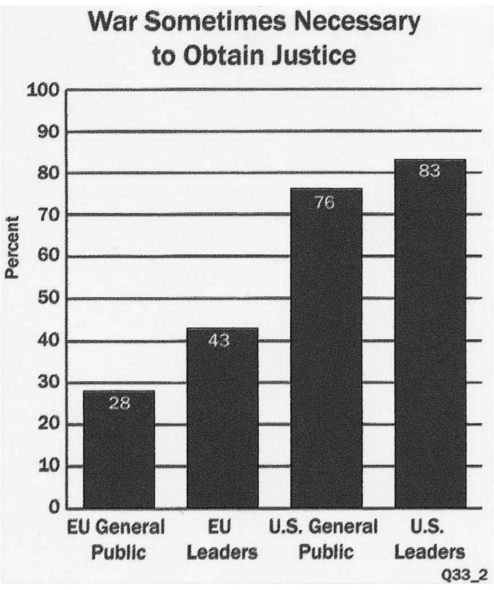
Even before the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, America's trans-Atlantic allies were becoming less concerned with the threat from the Soviet bloc. Mandatory military service for young men, which existed in most western European societies in the postwar era, was abandoned in country after country starting in the 1980s. Today, under a handful of countries, including Norway and Switzerland, maintain conscription chiefly for home guard purposes. European integration, which began with the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952 and whose founding objective was to reduce the possibility of another military conflict between Germany and its historical rivals, contributed to a diminished fear of one's neighbours within what is today the European Union. The arguments for spending money on tanks, fighter planes and troops appeared less and less compelling to more and more Europeans and, predictably, the defense budgets of their governments were, with rare exceptions, allowed to shrink over time.

This might not have happened, or at least not to the same degree, had successive American governments not been willing to bear an increasing share of defense costs within NATO and also throughout the world. The free rider problem that Defense Secretary Gates complained about in his 2011 speech in Brussels on the future of NATO can only come about when the party who bears a disproportionate share of the costs, risks and other burdens in a relationship is willing to do so or sees no alternative. As is typically the case in this sort of asymmetrical relationship, the distribution of benefits has not been entirely one-sided. Secretary Gates was certainly correct in pointing out that American taxpayers shoulder much of the costs that "free-riding" European countries have been unwilling to cover. But he failed to mention that what the United States has received in return is a leadership role that, by and large, has gone uncontested in NATO. The Iraq invasion was a major exception to this rule. Free riders may not pay their share, but they also do not have to be listened to or have their views taken seriously, unless they happen to occupy some strategic geo-political space or have some

other attribute that makes their preferences relevant in the eyes of the dominant country.

America's military capabilities and presence throughout the world are truly exceptional. But they are not exceptional because the American belief system is more militaristic or imperialistic than those of other western democracies. Granted that there are attitudinal differences that are not insignificant. Figure 5 shows that American citizens and their leaders are far more likely than their European counterparts to believe that "Under some conditions, war is necessary to obtain justice." Pacifist sentiment very clearly is deeper and more widespread in much of western Europe than in the United States. But the important question is this: Are Americans more likely to believe that the use of military force and even war are sometimes necessary to achieve justice because their cultural DNA disposes them toward the use of force? Or are they more likely to see military force as a justifiable option because the course of geo-political history has thrust them in the role of the world's policeman, a role that Americans, by a wide margin, say that they reject? A 2007 survey carried out for the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that 76 percent of Americans agreed that the U.S. was playing the role of world policeman more than it should and 75 percent disagreed that the U.S. has a responsibility to play this role in order to fight violations of international law and aggression wherever they occur.

Figure 5



Source: German Marshall Fund of the United States. 2011. Transatlantic Trends: Leaders. Chart 11, p.10.

Americans do indeed believe that their country has an exceptional role to play in the world affairs and that this has been their destiny since the Pilgrims arrived at Massachusetts Bay. They are not isolationists, but their thinking when it comes to the rest of the world has had a strongly insular character that made the attacks of 9/11—attacks on American soil—especially traumatic. "As an American," writes Shannen Rossmiller in *The Unexpected Patriot* (2011), "we kind of have this perceived invincibility and 9/11, for me, shattered all of that" (NPR). In a society where a strong majority of the population believes that God has uniquely blessed America, this was indeed how the experience of 9/11 felt for many. The United States reacted immediately with the sword, and indeed surveys confirm what one may also learn from listening to the public conversation in America and from observation of its government's actions abroad. Americans are more likely than their counterparts in most other western democracies to see the use of military force as sometimes necessary and just.

But American exceptionalism in world affairs is not just a matter of different beliefs and values. No other country has military capabilities that come close to those that the United States is able to deploy. The difference between America and other countries cannot be reduced to mere measures of how many aircraft carriers, tanks and missiles each commands or how many dollars are spent on defense. Intelligence capabilities, technology, diplomatic support and the willingness to use forces also contribute to American exceptionalism when it comes to being able to act militarily. Commenting on the successful mission that resulted in the killing of Osama bin Laden, French political scientist Dominique Moïsi (2011) says,

> America is perhaps entering into a phase of relative decline and its staggering indebtedness places it in an uncomfortable situation of dependence on China, but the United States remains alone in the category of multi-dimensional superpower. Neither China, India nor Russia, and even less the European Union, has the capacity and the will to mount the sort of operations that led to the killing of bin Laden... Hard power, the power to interdict and to limit, is still indispensable: soft power, the power to persuade and convince, is not sufficient on its own. Therein lies the essential lesson for Europe. Is it already too late for Europe to hear it?

America continues to be, as Josef Joffe (2009) says, the default power in world affairs. This status rests principally on its hard power capabilities. If all the other differences between the United States and other western democracies were of a minor magnitude—no greater and, in some respects, even less significant than the gap between Red and Blue America, Black and White America, or across some other domestic dividing line—one would still be justified in speaking of American exceptionalism on the basis of its military capabilities alone. This may change at some point in the future. But that point is not likely to be reached soon.

American Exceptionalism and World Affairs: Superpower or Default Power?

American exceptionalism matters in domestic politics chiefly as a political narrative around which support for and opposition to certain policies, values and vision of American society coalesce. But in world affairs it is not the story but the empirical reality of American exceptionalism that matters. Amidst the blur of change and flashpoints of crisis that have marked the last decade a number of things have become clear. One is that the long era of America's global economic dominance has entered what might be called a period of diminished expectations. The other is that the United States remains exceptional—the indispensable nation—in world affairs and is likely to remain so for many years to come. This is not quite what the crowing triumphalists predicted in the 1990s when the United States was the world's superpower *sans pareil*. But it is much more than today's declinists and naysayers of American exceptionalism are willing to concede.

China is already the world's largest market of for the sales of automotive vehicles. It has eclipsed Germany as the world's foremost exporter. The size of its economy may well surpass that of the United States within a decade. Facts and forecasts of this sort are well known. Why then did foreign investors not flock to the Renminbi and to Chinese investments in mid-2011 when the American economy sputtered on the verge of recession, having barely emerged from that of 2008-09; when Congress and the president locked horns over raising the government's debt limit, eventually reaching an agreement that the investment community considered to be so inadequate that one of the major credit rating agencies, Standard and Poor's, downgraded the United States' credit rating for the first time in history; and when the European Union continued to be rocked by debt problems in several of its member-states, producing

serious fears about the viability and future of the Euro? Why did investors turn instead to the U.S. dollar and U.S. treasury bills, along with gold of course, and not to China as a safe haven for their investments?

The answer is doubtless complex and perhaps best left to economists to provide. But this much is clear: size is important, but not everything. The EU economy, as Eurocrats will eagerly tell anyone who wishes to listen, is already larger than that of the United States. Germany, not the United States, was regularly the world's largest exporter before China assumed this rank in 2010. And yet the Euro, the common currency for 23 of the EU's 27 member-states, has yet to rival the U.S. dollar as a world reserve currency. There has been much talk for a decade about the Euro achieving this status, or about a "basket" of currencies that would include the Renminbi and the Euro becoming the new currency standard for international transactions. Developments of this sort may eventually happen. But as the market crisis of the summer of 2011 demonstrated, the U.S. dollar is, perhaps only by default these days, the world's reserve currency. Moreover, for all its problems of public and private debt and the absence of a political consensus about how to manage these problems, the United States continues to be the default safe haven for much of the global investment community.

This default status may not be a cause for pride. The structural and demographic problems of the EU and the profligate domestic policies of some of its members have prevented it and its currency from achieving the global influence that some predicted years ago. China, for all its size and growth, has a currency whose exchange value is still tightly controlled by the state and thus does not trade freely on international markets as do the dollar and the Euro. Opportunities for investors to place their money in China continue to be limited by the regulatory policies of the Chinese state, by its very closed banking system, but perhaps also by nagging and usually unstated worries that for political reasons China may not be as safe a haven for capital as its rather astounding record of economic growth would otherwise suggest.

All of this leaves the United States as the default economic power, though certainly not as triumphant nor as dominant as it was as recently as the 1990s. With the prospect of another global recession on the horizon in 2011, investors bought the now downgraded treasury bills of the United States and invested in the dollar. They did so *faute de mieux* (although gold and the gold-backed Swiss franc were also attractive magnets

for investors). Compared to the alternatives on offer, the United States was seen by investors to be a safer haven.

America is also the world's default power when it comes to issues of security that require the use of military force. As Michael Ignatieff wrote during the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, "Multilateral solutions to the world's problems are all very well, but they have not teeth unless America bares its fangs (SM22)." This will not convince those who believe that it is precisely the enormity of American military force and its government's demonstrated willingness to use it that are root causes of international conflict. Harold Pinter's characterization of the United States as an "award-winning, gold-plated monster" wins nods of approval from many American and non-American critics of U.S. foreign policy. But if we assume that the world's occasional nastiness is not always caused by American actions and that the repertoire of diplomatic solutions will sometimes prove inadequate to the task, the question then becomes, "Who will provide the necessary military force?"

All of this leaves the United States as the default economic power, though certainly not as triumphant nor as dominant as it was as recently as the 1990s.

The answer is the United States, with or without British support and usually, but not always, under the rubric of a NATO mission. The story of Europe's inability to coordinate a military response to the conflicts in the Balkans during the 1990s has been told often enough. The NATO attack on Serbian forces in Kosovo in 1999 was only possible because President Clinton persuaded a reluctant congress to support what was presented as a humanitarian mission. The EU has no single voice to speak on its behalf when it comes to international conflicts. Instead it has several competing voices, including the Commission's External Action Directorate, under Lady Catherine Ashton, the President of the European Council, Herman von Rompuy, and the European Parliament. Moreover, none of the heads of state of the major EU member-states has shown much inclination to cede to the EU the final say on matters involving the use of force. The EU does have its own defense force, under the European Security and Defense Policy, which has

and continues to perform policing and peacekeeping operations in the Balkans, Africa and some other parts of the world. Its capacities are, however, quite limited.

The UN has its own set of limitations when it comes to the use of military force. The Security Council's 1990 authorization for the use of force in a conflict, given by Resolution 678 that called for the removal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait by 15 January, 1991 and that authorized UN member-states to use all necessary means to remove them, is surely the *ne plus ultra* when it comes to legitimizing military action. But history shows that such authorization is rarely granted. The UN has long and extensive experience in coordinating peacekeeping missions that depend on troops from national militaries being placed under UN command. But on those occasions when it has had to interpose such forces between belligerents, at least one of whom wanted to continue fighting, the UN's record has not earned it much congratulations. The inability to prevent the 1994 genocide in Rwanda is widely seen as just such a failure.

Particular countries might be looked to in order to provide military support in international conflicts.

Particular countries might be looked to in order to provide military support in international conflicts. And indeed in some cases they have. France has occasionally intervened in circumstances in its former colonies, sending troops and *matériel* without asking or waiting for any supranational authority to approve this. The 2010 French mission in Côte d'Ivoire in support of the presidential candidate who in fact won the country's national election and to oust the incumbent who refused to leave the presidency, is a recent example. But neither France nor any other country acting alone, with the exception of the United States, has a military that is large and sophisticated enough to sustain a major military operation.

Nor do these other countries have the political will, although Britain and Australia may be exceptions here. In the aftermath of World War II the European allies maintained their national military forces and virtually all of them retained mandatory military service for

young adult males. This requirement was abandoned in country after country between the 1980s and the last few years. Of course the United States also abolished conscription in 1973. Young males are still required to register with the Selective Service System, but the all volunteer military is well established in the United States. In this respect Western Europe and the United States have followed a similar path.

But the similarity stops there. "European identity," writes Ignatieff (2003), "became postmilitary and postnational. This opened a widening gap with the United States. It remained a nation in which flag, sacrifice and martial honor are central to the national identity." Today, roughly one-tenth of the American population has served in the military or is on active duty, a share of the population with a direct connection to military service that is amplified considerably if takes into account their immediate and extended family members (Segal 2004). Marines trooping the colors before the national anthem is sung at the beginning of a college basketball game, air force jets screaming overhead before the start of a stock car race in Indianapolis, and the spouse and children of a soldier sitting in the visitors' gallery and saluted by the president during his annual State of the Union Address are some of the innumerable ways through which martial honor continues to be woven into American society and identity.

Non-Americans sometimes find such displays to be disorientingly and disturbingly militaristic. Of course some Americans react in the same way, and there are Europeans who are quick to come to the defense of military values and achievements. The criticism that France's Green Party leader, Eva Joly received in 2011 when she said that symbols and stories of war should be eliminated from that country's Bastille Day celebrations—criticisms that came from the right and left—showed that the growing influence of pacifism in Western Europe has not expunged all martial traces from national identities on *le vieux continent*.

Nevertheless, a wide gap has opened between the United States and most other democratic societies when it comes to what Ignatieff calls martial elements in their respective national identities and, relatedly, in their willingness to support the use of force to resolve international conflicts and protect American interests abroad. "Mr. Big," as Joffe calls the United States on the world stage, is big both because of his willingness to spend on defense and engage militarily abroad, but also because many of his friends understood that they

could spend less and de-emphasize the status of their own militaries while safely sheltering under the security umbrella of the United States. The gap in defense capabilities and in the willingness to use force has grown so wide that it may be unbridgeable. It certainly is one of the ways in which American exceptionalism matters most.

This, at least, is the judgment of former U.S. Secretary of Defense, Colin Powell. Reflecting on America's role in the world, Powell links the country's unrivalled military status to what he believes is America's providential destiny:

> I think our historical position is that we are a superpower that cannot be touched in this generation by anyone in terms of military power, economic power, the strength of our political system, and our value system. What we would like to see is a greater understanding of the democratic system, the open-market economic system, the rights of men and women to achieve their destiny as God has directed them to do, if they are willing to work for it. And we really do not wish to go to war with people, but, by God, we will have the strongest military around, and that's not a bad thing to have. It encourages and champions our friends that are weak, and it chills the ambitions of the evil (O'Rourke 2004, 42).

Powell very clearly does not believe that the United States is a mere default power. A default power is strong and its role exceptional because of the weaknesses of those who might otherwise be its rivals. Powell argues that America's unique role in the world reposes not just on its military might, which is so far superior to that of other countries, but on its values, its free market economy and its providential mission to "chill the ambitions of the evil." It is almost impossible to imagine a leading western government figure from a country other than the United States using such language to characterize geo-politics. Former British prime minister Tony Blair and former Czech president Vaclav Havel are perhaps the only prominent exceptions.

Powell's confident assessment of how and why America is exceptional and not merely a default power in her dotage is far more likely to win the agreement of American conservatives than liberals. There is no consensus on the American self-image that Powell describes. But the mere fact that many and perhaps most

Americans would agree with him, and that relatively few would dismiss this national self-image outright, attests to American exceptionalism.

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Figures

Table

About the author

Stephen Brooks teaches Political Science at the University of Windsor and the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Professor Brooks is the director of the University of Michigan's Ottawa Internship Program. He is also the author of several books in English and French, including the forthcoming *Canadian Democracy* (2012, 7th ed.), *Understanding American Politics* (2009), *As Others See Us: The Causes and Consequences of Foreign Perceptions of America* (2006), and, with Alain G. Gagnon and James Bickerton, *Six penseurs en quête de liberté, d'égalité et de commenauté* (2003). Dr. Brooks's research interests include the political influence of intellectuals, political thought in Canada and the United States, and foreign perceptions of American politics and public policy.

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