ABSTRACT
Most writers agree that domestic ideas about what kind of country the United States is affect its foreign policy. In the United States, this predominant idea is American exceptionalism, which in turn is used to explain US foreign policy traditions over time. This article argues that the predominant definition of American exceptionalism, and the way it is used to explain US foreign policy in political science, relies on outdated scholarship within history. It betrays a largely superficial understanding of American exceptionalism as an American identity. This article aims to clarify the definition of American exceptionalism, arguing that it should be retained as a definition of American identity. Furthermore, it couples American exceptionalism and US foreign policy differently than what is found in most political science literature. It concludes that American exceptionalism is a useful tool in understanding US foreign policy, if properly defined.

Most writers on US foreign policy agree that domestic ideas about what kind of country the United States is affect its foreign policy. Whether in the study of US commitment to multilateralism (Ikenberry 2001, 2006; Nau 2002; Legro 2005; Patrick 2009), post–cold war policy (Leffler 2005; Ikenberry et al. 2009), or the historic US foreign policy traditions (Ruggie 1997; Desch 2007–8), scholars write extensively about the importance of an American

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identity for its foreign policy. In this context, American identity is usually understood as “American exceptionalism,” which in turn is used to explain US foreign policy traditions over time. Specifically, American exceptionalism is often said to have inspired a Janus-faced identity for the United States, including both an exemplarist identity and a missionary identity, which in turn contributed to a Janus-faced foreign policy: an “aloof” foreign policy tradition (previously called “isolationism”) and an internationalist foreign policy tradition. I call these the identity and foreign policy dichotomies.

In this article, I argue that not only is current scholarship marred by sloppy definitions of American exceptionalism but that the manner in which American exceptionalism is used to explain US foreign policy is unsatisfactory. Those scholars who have argued in terms of dichotomous thinking have ignored the complex nature of American exceptionalism, in which the two strands have constantly interacted with each other rather than taking turns in one-sidedly or cyclically informing American foreign policy. Furthermore, the foreign policy dichotomy is outdated and incorrect. In fact, American identity and US foreign policy have been more constant than conventional wisdom lets on.

This article seeks to clarify contemporary scholarship by mapping out the existing—and, I argue, insufficient—ways of conceptualizing American exceptionalism and its connection to US foreign policy traditions. I will first discuss how to most fruitfully relate American exceptionalism to the concept of national identity in the context of studying US foreign policy. I then present the dichotomies and argue that American exceptionalism—properly understood—should be retained as a definition of American identity but that the current manner in which American exceptionalism and US foreign policy are connected is outdated. I briefly elaborate on what I deem to be a more correct way of coupling American exceptionalism with US foreign policy. The aim is to contribute to a constructive debate on how to think about—and use as an analytical category—a concept that is much used and abused in writings on US foreign policy.

**AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AS A NATIONAL IDENTITY**

This article defines American identity as the widespread and deep belief in American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism itself entails the belief in the special and unique role the United States is meant to play in world history, its distinctiveness from the Old World, and its resistance to the laws

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1. I thank Walter Carlsnaes for helping me with this formulation.
of history (the rise to power and inevitable fall that has afflicted all previous republics; McCrisken 2002, 64–65).

National identity can be defined as the “maintenance and continual re-interpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths, and traditions that form the distinctive heritage of the nation, and the identification of individuals with that heritage and its pattern” (Smith 2003, 24–25). Thus, national identity is not a constant but rather a concept in constant motion. Studying the nature of the American identity has a long pedigree (Crèvecoeur 1791/1904; de Tocqueville 1835/2000; Bryce 1887), which is fitting insofar as the entire course of American history “coincides with the rise of modern nationalism” (Van Alstyne 1965, v). The study of the rise of the United States to great power status is in a sense a study in the development of a national identity. The case for studying identity in foreign policy is that it directs our attention to preferences and the way “interests” are defined (Kowert 1998–99). Indeed, part of the attraction of constructivist theory in international relations is that it challenges the traditional focus on structural limitations on states by bringing social factors such as identity into the analysis.

American identity is—as are all national identities—complex and, as pointed out by Anthony Smith in the definition above, subject to continual reinterpretation. What is striking about the American identity is the strong and continuous presence throughout US history of its exceptionalist formulation. Thus, while one risks simplifying too much, this article argues that when studying US foreign policy, American identity is most usefully defined as American exceptionalism because the belief in American exceptionalism has been a powerful, persistent, and popular myth throughout American history, and furthermore, it has been used in formulating arguments for ever more internationalist and expanding foreign policies. Significantly, exceptionalism was formulated and identified with before the impressive increase in American power and influence in international politics exhibited in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, strongly suggesting that an exceptionalist vision was not promoted as a rationale for gaining territory and influence at this later time (although a complex interrelationship between rhetoric and action is always present). Thus, it is important that scholars of US foreign policy—and of American political thought—continue to grapple with this concept.

Specifically, what needs to be noted is that American exceptionalism goes a long way toward integrating other terms commonly used to describe American identity, such as “manifest destiny,” “exemplar,” “missionary” and the like, as we will see below. This is not to deny the subtlety and complexity of American national identity but rather to seek conceptual clarity. By clearing the field of its myriad of concepts meant to describe American identity, we may gain some clarity into its impact on US foreign policy.
So the question is as follows: How has the powerful, persistent, and popular myth of American exceptionalism affected US foreign policy? I shall first present the conventional view and then present my own argument.

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND US FOREIGN POLICY: THE ARGUMENTS

As anyone who studies US foreign policy knows well, American exceptionalism and US foreign policy have been intimately connected in the literature on US foreign policy to such a degree that this connection is often simply assumed or taken for granted. The conventional understanding of how the American identity as exceptional has influenced American foreign policy employs two main dichotomies: an identity dichotomy and a concomitant foreign policy dichotomy. The identity dichotomy consists of “exemplary” exceptionalism and “missionary” exceptionalism (Tuveson 1968; Tucker and Hendrickson 1990; Ricard 1994; Stephanson 1995; McDougall 1997; McCrisken 2003; Dueck 2006). This means either that the United States is said to have viewed itself as an isolated New World, providing an exemplar for the world without having to engage directly with this world, or that it has viewed itself as a hands-on missionary, actively promoting its values of democracy and capitalism around the world.

The exemplary identity is then typically said to inspire an “isolationist” foreign policy (more recently, “aloof” has become the preferred term). Isolationism or aloofness was said to be exemplified by Puritan John Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill” speech and George Washington’s warning against “permanent alliances” in his farewell address of 1796. The missionary identity, however, is said to inspire an internationalist foreign policy. Missionary internationalism is often exemplified by Woodrow Wilson’s mission to make the world safe for democracy, for example. Basically, isolationism or aloofness means essentially keeping the world at a distance and tending to one’s own business, whereas internationalism means being actively engaged in world affairs (Kaplan 1987; Perkins 1993).

Some authors portray the relationship between the two descriptors as cyclical (i.e., American foreign policy has swung like a pendulum between isolationism and internationalism in accordance with its identity dichotomy; Hoffmann 1968; Klingberg 1983; Schlesinger 1986), but according to the latest edition of the Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy, the current consensus in the field is that the exemplary strand of exceptionalism dominated the early years of US foreign policy, whereas the missionary strand of exceptionalism conclusively won out in the foreign policy debate only after the attacks on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 (Mccrisken 2002, 2003, 14;
It is my argument that these two dichotomies should be discarded. They rely on outdated assumptions and do not explain US foreign policy traditions very well. Rather, the American national identity is better thought of as American exceptionalism, which has contributed to a more steady unilateral internationalism throughout US foreign policy history. The argument of this article can thus be simplified and summarized in two parts:

1. There is no identity dichotomy: American exceptionalism is a more correct substitute for the exemplary/missionary dichotomy.
2. There is no foreign policy dichotomy: Unilateral internationalism is a better description than isolationist/aloof or internationalist.

THE IDENTITY DICHOTOMY

I will now critically examine the idea that the American national identity consists of two opposite strains of exceptionalism. The next section will dispute that this led to two distinct foreign policy traditions. I aim to show that the tale of the two dichotomies is simplistic to the point of being incorrect.

The founding of the United States of America did combine two powerful ideas of exceptionalism: the Reformation idea of America as a religious exemplar and the Enlightenment idea of America as a political harbinger for the rest of the world (Zuckert 1996). But rather than remain intact as two distinct strands of American identity, engendering two opposite foreign policy traditions, the two ideas of exceptionalism for all intents and purposes fused with the American Revolution (Greene 1993). The early Puritan communities contributed a Protestant strain to the nascent national identity as a “chosen” people (Smith 2003, 24–25), which merged with an Enlightenment ideology in the mid- to late eighteenth century, forging a distinct American identity. The result was a powerful sense of exceptionalism that, while consisting of two complementary aspects, has not led to two distinct foreign policy traditions. Rather, American exceptionalism always inspired the United States to reform the world in its image. In other words, the “exemplar” part of the identity has been taken too literally, and it has been coupled with (and said to have caused)
a foreign policy tradition—Isolationism—which is now discarded by historians of US foreign relations. Its usefulness is thus highly questionable.

Both the exemplary and the missionary theses trace their origins to the same religious and political sources. What binds them together is the concept of American exceptionalism (McCrisken 2002, 64–65).

The Exemplary Identity
Whereas America was not a promised land in the biblical sense, it was interpreted as such by the Puritan settlers. The religious commitments of the colonists are important in order to understand the development of the dominant images of the American national identity, as it is mainly this religious strain that has inspired both the exemplary and the missionary theses in the foreign policy literature. Essentially, Puritan settlers, having experienced a “perilous exodus across the seas,” set out to create an ideal “American Israel” and a “New English Jerusalem” (Smith 2003, 137–38). They viewed their own exodus to the North American wilderness as part of the Christian millennial story. The Reformation had revealed the true Christians—the Puritans—and had at the same time opened up a New World. Surely this could not be a coincidence (Bercovitch 1978, 140). “Far from being just a simple outpost of European civilization,” writes historian Anders Stephanson, the New World “was a sacred testing ground of nothing less than world-historical importance” (1995, 10).

The various settlements within the French, Dutch, and English colonies “exhibited a powerful urge on the part of their authors to reorder some aspects of the existing European world, to reverse some social, political, or economic trends they found worrisome, or to restore some imagined lost and less threatening world” (Greene 1993, 58). As Puritan leader John Winthrop warned his fellow travelers in the now famous sermon “A Modell of Christian Charity” (Merrill and Paterson 2005, 31), “For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.”² Winthrop was issuing a warning to these early colonists. America, the site for the pursuit of their “idealized versions” of the Old World, “provided an appropriate venue in which to seek Europe’s new beginnings” (Greene 1993, 58).

While the vast literature on early US foreign policy assumes the Puritans wanted to isolate themselves from Europe, the Puritan errand was in fact

². It is somewhat historically unclear where Winthrop made his speech—aboard the Arbella on the way to America, back in England, or somewhere unknown. Italics are mine.
multifaceted (Bozeman 1986). Whereas the earlier Pilgrims were reluctant to leave England—and did so only because life there had become impossible for Separatists (Madsen 1998, 16; Kagan 2006, 8)—the Puritans were on an “errand in the wilderness” to create a “working model” of reformed Christendom “so that ultimately all Europe would imitate New England” (Bozeman 1986, 232; Miller 1953). Indeed, Madsen argues that Winthrop’s Puritans were seeking to escape persecution and establish a “new Jerusalem” but also expecting to be able to return to a “reformed Egypt”—to launch a “counteroffensive across the Atlantic” (Madsen 1998, 16). In this interpretation, the Puritans were on a mission of world historic importance, namely, to reform Europe. In effect, they were “global revolutionaries” (Kagan 2006, 8). Further evidence against the isolationism of early colonists is found among the Anglicans in Virginia, who viewed that land as an “extension of God’s chosen England” rather than a separate place to be isolated from the mother country (Stephanson 1995, 4). In fact, the Massachusetts Bay Colony was not a “battered remnant of suffering Separatists thrown up on a rocky shore,” as scholar of Puritans Perry Miller has pointed out. Rather, “it was an organized task force of Christians, executing a flank attack on the corruptions of Christendom” found in the Old World (Miller 1953, 14).

Certainly, the geographical distance between the New and the Old World that Alexis de Tocqueville remarked on in the 1830s served to underline the feeling of isolation on the part of the colonists. But the simple fact of geographic distance did not cause isolationism. The Anglo-American settlers saw themselves as “the vanguard of an English civilization that was leading humanity into the future,” competing against attempts by the Spaniards and the French to secure their own civilizing missions in North America (Kagan 2006, 12; Miller 1953). New England and the Old World were the same world in this line of thinking, spiritually if not geographically.

And so we arrive at an interpretation rather different from the conventional one: the Puritan mission was not isolated from the rest of the world. They saw themselves as spreading and reforming European (English) civilization, not escaping it. Miller’s emphasis on the nonseparating and non-isolationist Puritans is significant. The Puritans were missionaries, seeking to spread the revolution. Exemplary exceptionalism thus fuses with missionary exceptionalism.

3. According to Deborah Madsen (1998, 16), John Winthrop’s fleet was made up of “non-Separating Congregationalists.”

4. Nevertheless, Stephanson affirms the conventional view of the Pilgrims and the Puritans as exemplary isolationists or “separatists.” See also Miller (1953).
The Missionary Identity

The Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy argues that America’s sense of mission is represented in the ideas of “manifest destiny,” “imperialism,” “internationalism,” “leader of the free world,” “modernization theory,” and the “new world order” (McCrisken 2002, 63). Interestingly, manifest destiny is claimed to be a later version of American exceptionalism. Indeed, the era of manifest destiny was proof that the “missionary” strand of exceptionalism was becoming the dominant one (68).

But tracing the origins of an American sense of “mission” has led us back to the Puritans and the religious founding of America. Ernest Lee Tuveson, sounding a familiar theme by now, grounded America’s sense of mission in millennialism, arguing that the manner in which the early American colonists understood the Reformation and its significance for world history deeply influenced their views of the emerging nation. As we saw, the millennial narrative viewed the Reformation as ushering in a sequence of victories for the forces of good over evil—including the discovery of America and culminating in the American Revolution.

This becomes even clearer when we look at the political exceptionalism that developed with the American Revolution. The political founding of America acquired its missionary aspect by viewing events as divinely inspired. The success of the Revolution (1776–83) and the subsequent Constitutional Convention in 1787 were seen as so improbable by many founding fathers that they could only explain it in terms of divine intervention. As John Jay said in 1777, Americans were the first people favored by providence with the opportunity of rationally choosing their forms of government, and thus, as Benjamin Franklin asserted, providence itself had called America to a post of honor in the struggle for the dignity and happiness of human nature (Weinberg 1935, 17). Indeed, the founding only built up its mythical significance with the passing of time. Abraham Lincoln’s prolific secretary of state, William H. Seward, characterized the entrance of the United States onto the world scene as “the most important secular event in the history of the human race” (Burns 1957, 14, 90). And Woodrow Wilson—American exceptionalism personified—argued that the United States was a country that would employ its force “for the elevation of the spirit of the human race” (McCrisken 2002, 71).

The focus on the founding is important because it provided the new republic with ready symbols, myths, and statesmen for the building of a common national identity out of 13 republics. Its Enlightenment principles, expressed through its famous documents, forged a nation out of ideas. But the founding was also about cutting bloodlines. It laid the premises for the development of an American identity as opposed to a British one. Because the United States
decided to break free from England, it was prevented from using its English past as the focus of the usual national project of glorifying one’s heritage, especially since their departure from one another was less than amicable. Since, nevertheless, America’s past was British and the Americans themselves were largely Britons (or “Anglo-Scotch”), the new United States had to look to the future, where nothing but ideas existed. American nationality became connected to an instant ideology, forged in revolution as opposed to a secular development of a “community through history.” The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution therefore “created” the American nation and its central myths (Krakau 1997, 10).

The development of an American identity was therefore already well on its way to being established when the floods of European immigrants arrived at its shores later in the nineteenth century. The influx of German and Irish Catholic immigrants—eventually supplying more cultural and religious diversity—had yet to arrive at its shores when the United States was in its infancy. By creating a nation based on Enlightenment principles, American nationalism became universalistic. Its nationalism was civic, not ethnic, freed from the “shackles of history.” In Daniel Bell’s words, America was “an exempt nation” that had been freed “from the laws of decadence or the laws of history” (1991, 51). The reason for this is that America was “born modern”—it was freed from the burden of having to shake off old socioeconomic and political structures and did not have to undergo a “wrenching transition to modernity” (51). As Louis Hartz has pointed out, the United States does not have a feudal past (1955), and while it was without past or precedent, America was surely endowed with a great future (Kohn 1957, 41).

Thus, the defining characteristic of an American national identity was not really that it was a “nation of immigrants” but rather that it was believed to be exceptional in its blessings of liberty and republicanism. To become an American, it is not enough simply to have immigrated to the United States; one must also accept this idea of American exceptionalism. Abraham Lincoln stated that no matter the origins of immigrants, by accepting the “moral sentiment” of the Declaration of Independence, they were as much Americans “as though they were the blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of the

5. In Thomas Jefferson’s words, the Revolutionary War started as “a family quarrel between us and the English, who were then our brothers” (Onuf 2000, 21).

6. For immigration statistics, see EH.net (http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/cohn.immigration.us). The years from 1630 to 1700 averaged 2,200 immigrants per annum; from 1730 to 1780, 4,325; from 1780 to 1819, 9,900. After 1832, the immigration rates increased dramatically.

7. When they did, in the 1830s and onward, New England historians, mostly clergymen, began emphasizing the Protestant origins of the United States (Stephanson 1995, 29).
men who wrote that Declaration” (Lincoln 1858). In essence, then, the motto *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one—fits better than perhaps initially thought. Originally suggesting the unity of a country made up of different colonies or states, it has come to mean today the unity created among a diverse population. As Gunnar Myrdal pointed out, America is diverse but still one through its strong and unifying identity as exceptional (Myrdal 1944; Beasley 2004, 25).

In short, authors have identified the idea of American exceptionalism as the force behind the missionary part of American identity, which results in “U.S. expansion or intervention in the affairs of other nations,” as political scientist Trevor McCrisken writes. The United States would project its power abroad in order to help other nations become more like itself since “inside every foreigner there is the potential, even the desire, to be an American.” Thus, writes McCrisken, the missionary strand of American exceptionalism postulates that all the people of the world want to be like Americans, whether they realize it or not (2003, 11).

Together the Puritans, the settlers, the explorers, the revolutionaries, and the founding fathers contributed pieces to the developing American national identity (Weeks 1996, 10). The religious and political founding combined to create an exceptionalist image, leading to the idea that the United States was a “model” for the rest of the world. What is not clear, however, is that this entailed the United States remaining aloof from the world’s troubles and leading only by example, as the *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy* posits (Mccrisken 2002). In fact, it seems to have meant the opposite.

THE FOREIGN POLICY DICHOTOMY

Those scholars of US foreign policy who argue that there was an exemplarist identity in American history that inspired an isolationist foreign policy have a problem: contemporary historians do not think early US foreign policy was isolationist at all, and the term itself only appeared in the early twentieth century as an accusation used by adherents of a vigorous US foreign policy to hurl against the opposition. In fact, the idea of an exemplar identity inspiring an isolationist—or aloof—foreign policy constitutes the old paradigm among historians of US foreign relations. The idea used to be that the United States was founded as a country aiming to isolate itself from the world, cutting off any ties to potentially corrupting influences emanating from the Old World. Many historians and political scientists have quoted Thomas Paine’s

8. I thank Allen Lynch for bringing this to my attention.
dictum from *Common Sense*, wherein he stated that the American colonies “ought form no partial connection with any part of [Europe]. It is the true interest of America to steer clear of European contentions” (1791/1918). Then they would usually conclude that Paine’s view would come to dominate “U.S. foreign policy over much of the next two hundred years,” as diplomatic historian Walter LaFeber has written (1989, 19), and the isolationist paradigm came to dominate diplomatic history. No more, however.

*The Old Paradigm*

Briefly, the old paradigm of early US foreign policy held that the United States only emerged onto the international scene in the late nineteenth century, when it suddenly and forcefully expelled the Spanish empire from the US sphere of influence in the Spanish-American War of 1898. (Along the way, the United States also somehow acquired colonies in Asia.) This imperial “aberration”—as Samuel Flagg Bemis called it (Perkins 1962, 20)—marked the transition from isolationism to internationalism in US foreign policy, a tradition cemented with Woodrow Wilson’s quest to make the world “safe for democracy” (see also Field 1978; LaFeber and Beisner 1978). The reason for this early aloofness on the part of the United States was the commitment to being an “exemplar” to the world—an idea supposedly inherited from the Puritans and followed through by the founders. And as we saw, the internationalist foreign policy tradition would also be traced back to exceptionalism—this time a missionary kind of exceptionalism. Some historians would argue that the United States in fact cycled between internationalism and isolationism throughout its history, whereas others argued the United States was first isolationist, then internationalist. This was, in short, the old isolationist/internationalist dichotomous paradigm of diplomatic history, one that was also used by political scientists writing about US foreign policy (Wolfers 1962; Klingberg 1983; Kaplan 1987; Ruggie 1997; Hoffmann 2003; McCrisken 2003).9

The old paradigm argued that notwithstanding the initial alliance with France to gain independence, “isolationism” was the strategy of choice of a new and idealistic republic, rejecting “traditional diplomacy and power politics,” as Felix Gilbert wrote (1961, 89). In this classic paradigm of isolationism, George Washington’s farewell address (which counseled against “permanent alliances”) and Thomas Jefferson’s first inaugural address (which counseled against “entangling alliances”) “embedded isolationism in the public mind” (Adler 1957/1974, 11). These statements were seen as the definitive

9. For textbooks that still use this dichotomous paradigm, see Perkins (2005) or Deudney and Meiser (2008).
formulation of early American thinking on foreign policy, updated to a nineteenth-century context by the Monroe Doctrine (Adler 1957/1974, 12). Importantly, the United States could be isolationist because, as C. Vann Woodward wrote, it enjoyed “free security” and free land, enabling the national myth of “America as an innocent nation in a wicked world able to obtain freely and innocently that which other nations sought by the sword” (1960, 4, 7). The idea of “free security” naturally went along with an assumption of the United States as an isolated and isolating, as opposed to an expanding and expansionist, nation.

But this meant the isolationist paradigm contained an inherent contradiction. The classic paradigm argued that the United States had expanded dramatically during the nineteenth century yet had—at the same time—been isolationist. The Spanish-American War seemed like uncharacteristic behavior for a republic that adhered to isolationism. Only by assuming nineteenth-century continental expansion was somehow part of domestic history, as opposed to acts of foreign policy, could US foreign policy be characterized as isolationist until the 1890s, when the United States suddenly experienced a brief period of “imperial aberration” contrary to its assumed nature as exceptionally peaceful and good. Essentially, the old thesis of expansionism as isolationism rested on a Eurocentric view of American foreign policy, a perspective that viewed US international relations as primarily faced toward the Atlantic Ocean. This is connected to the fact that some historians of foreign relations assume manifest destiny’s inherent legitimacy, rather than question westward expansion within a colonial or imperial framework, which again is connected to their assumption of a normative exceptionalism on the part of the United States (Rosenberg 1998, 66–67).

As historian Emily Rosenberg argues, “these processes of conquest are still often masked by the disciplinary structures that place ‘frontier’ history as a subdivision of ‘domestic’ rather than of ‘international’ history” (1998, 66–67; Brauer 1989). Indeed, not only classic literature but also current scholarship straddles the expansionism-isolationism issue rather uncomfortably. Despite less frequent use of the term “isolationism,” the idea of isolation and aloofness is often used. For example, one often reads that the United States was an “aloof” country in its early years, taking care to keep away from the “continuous jostling of European power politics” (Ruggie 1997, 89), but that it later became an “internationalist” country (Legro 2000). For instance, political scientist Stewart Patrick argues that nineteenth-century US security policy consisted of “isolationism with a unilateral thrust.” As a rule, he argues, the United States kept political engagement with other nations to a minimum, but, “closer to home, the United States moved first toward continental domination—creating Jefferson’s ‘empire of liberty’—and then ‘regional
hegemony” (Patrick 2009, 5). Here, Patrick is arguing that hegemony in the western hemisphere is compatible with isolationism, an argument that seems more than a little Eurocentric. The argument of “exemplary expansion” only holds, however, if we assume that the acquisition of new territory, previously not belonging to one’s country, somehow falls within the realm of domestic, as opposed to foreign, policy. Manifest destiny, indeed.

To sum up, the string of territorial acquisitions before the Spanish-American War was characterized as a “domestic” matter (thus validating an isolationist or aloof thesis), by believing that large swaths of territory in North America and the Caribbean were naturally future parts of America. One has to buy the logic of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism to support this argument. Granted, one could argue that any “isolationism” was purely directed at the European great powers. In other words, only Atlantic foreign policy counted as foreign policy (Kaplan 1987). But this logic contains two tensions: First, it does not take into account the fact that these very same great powers had colonial possessions in the Americas and the Caribbean, and thus coveting these territories was, in fact, a way of meddling in European affairs.10 Second, such an argument would then have to incorporate expansion and expansionism into a narrative about an “exemplary” or isolated country/people not seeking imperial possessions in the manner of the European powers. Never mind the awkward fit this makes for cases such as the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans, the Mexican-American War, and the continued obsession with Cuba.

In fact, nineteenth-century continental expansion and expansionism was intimately related to the building of great power status—as current literature in history points out—and should thus not be seen in isolation from the United States’ later imperial adventures. When seen in the context of the steady expansion and strong expansionist ideology espoused by Americans and their leaders since the founding fathers, one is loath to view the War of 1898 as merely an “imperial aberration.”

The New Paradigm
The idea of isolationism as the classic US foreign policy strategy is a thesis that was very influential in the field of diplomatic history between 1960

10. France controlled the St. Lawrence River region through eastern Canada and down the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River. After the Seven Years’ War, France ceded most of the Louisiana Territory east of the Mississippi River to Great Britain and that west of the river to Spain. France retained the area around New Orleans. Spain also controlled Florida and the Caribbean, as well as the southwest and California (until Mexican independence) and the Louisiana Territory (until the 1800 Treaty of San Ildefonso with France).
and 1990. Today, however, historians of US foreign relations reject the term “isolationism” as a valid description for early American foreign policy (McDougall 1997; Herring 2008).

The so-called revisionist historians of the Wisconsin School, led by William Appleman Williams, challenged the classic story of isolationism. Turning the paradigm on its head, the revisionist historians argued that the United States was actively participating in international affairs from its inception and that it never aimed to isolate itself from the world. Rather, the United States had always been “expansionist” and much less innocent than previously assumed by proponents of a normative exceptionalism on the part of the United States (1959). The continental expansion during the nineteenth century and the ideology behind it—formerly falling under western or settler/frontier history—was in fact the United States building an empire, and today this history is incorporated into the new paradigm as acts of foreign, not domestic, policy (Painter 1993; Williams 2005). In fact, it is now commonplace for historians of US foreign relations to connect the issue of expansion and expansionism in the nineteenth century to an overall US foreign policy tradition, linking early US foreign policy to its twentieth-century foreign policy (Hietala 1985/2003; Hunt 2007a; Nugent 2008).11 One does not need to endorse the Wisconsin School thesis championed by Williams in order to argue that early US foreign policy was not isolationist, however (McDougall 1997; Mead 2002). Regardless of one’s theoretical attachments, the historiographical consensus that has emerged is that US foreign policy was internationalist since the very founding of the country. Historians of early US foreign policy agree that, rather than being a nation growing up in isolation and enjoying “free security,” this was a nation “defined by its enemies, at home and abroad” (DeConde 1958, 11). “Revolutionary Americans did not aspire to isolation,” Peter Onuf and Nicholas Onuf write, “but rather to closer integration in the European world” (1993, 98; Onuf 2000, 60). This, in essence, is the new paradigm (Stagg 1983, 2009; Onuf and Onuf 1993).

The United States acquired a transcontinental territorial empire (if that is the word one wishes to use) in less than half a century, achieved supremacy in the Western Hemisphere, and laid the foundations for a twentieth-century superpower status in remarkably short time (Weeks 1996).12 This expansion was aided by the idea of American exceptionalism since it was fueled by the conviction that US foreign policy “is not tainted with evil or self-serving

11. Early works that made this connection, in addition to Williams’s, include Weinberg (1935), Graebner (1955), Van Alstyne (1965), and Paolino (1973).

motives” (Nugent 2008, xiv). Americans, rather, “are exceptions to the moral infirmities that plague the rest of humankind, because our ideals are pure.” The expansion was thus fueled by a faith in America’s moral exceptionalism (xiv). Indeed, the spectacular appropriation of half of Mexico (as a result of the US-initiated Mexican-American War; 1846–48) was treated by many Americans as moral vindication of their values. In President Andrew Jackson’s famous words, the United States was “extend[ing] the area of freedom” (Weinberg 1935, 109). Woodrow Wilson could not have said it better himself. Thus, the Mexican-American War confirmed the belief that American wars were wars for civilization, not subjugation—a moral exceptionalism. This perspective of continuity challenges the perspective of an aloof US foreign policy before the Spanish-American War of 1898, where the war is seen as the start of an American “empire” rather than its culmination. The empire literature argues there is little reason to categorize 1898 as a “break” in the history of US foreign policy at all.13 Senator Henry Cabot Lodge might agree. As he noted in the debate over what to do about the Philippines during the Spanish-American War, empire was nothing new to the United States—it had been practicing it for over 100 years.

What current history of the early republic tells us is that the founding fathers expressed lofty visions for a future “empire for liberty” of the Americas. Expansionism was an integral part of the building of this empire and, as previously mentioned, is intimately connected to the rejection of an isolationist/internationalist dichotomy. The fact that the Americans did not see themselves as invaders, aggressors, or occupiers is testament to the powerful exceptionalist identity that was expressed through its manifest destiny version during the nineteenth century.

This is not to deny internal debate among historians. Historian of US foreign relations Walter Russell Mead states that there are today two basic views among students of US foreign policy: One school sees a distinct break between an early American tradition of reticence and modesty on the international stage and a later and more “problematic” era of assertiveness and expansionism (with 1898 seen as dividing the two ages). The other school connects important features of twentieth-century US foreign policy (expansionism, assertiveness, imperial ambition) in American history dating back to the colonial era (Mead 2008). Thus, whereas the concept of isolationism has been discarded, the foreign policy dichotomy separating an early tradition

13. For literature that argues US foreign policy has been constantly expansionist rather than cycled between internationalism and aloofness or isolationism, see, e.g., Onuf (2000), Kagan (2006), and Nugent (2008).
of “reticence” or “modesty” from a later tradition of assertive internationalism is still employed by some historians.

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Why discuss a matter already considered passé by historians of US foreign relations? Because their colleagues in political science are slow to catch up. Notwithstanding the rejection of the concept of “isolationism,” many scholars still reproduce the dichotomy by substituting aloofness for isolationism—or, in other cases, authors still validate the thesis of isolationism.14 Fareed Zakaria based his well-received book on US foreign policy on the assumption—and to him, the puzzle—that the United States “hewed to a relatively isolationist line” after the Civil War, arguing that the United States underperformed as a great power (1998, 5). John G. Ruggie writes that ever since George Washington expressed aversion to “entangling alliances” in his farewell address (which, in fact, he did not do; rather, it was Thomas Jefferson who used that phrase much later), the United States has enjoyed its position as far removed from the power politics of the European great powers (1997, 89). Charles Kupchan writes of the United States’ “self-imposed isolation” in its early years (which he contrasts with the “radical internationalist departure since 1941”; 2003, 162). Stewart Patrick argues that for most of the nineteenth century, “the dominant strain in US security policy remained isolationism with a unilateral thrust” (2009, 5). John J. Mearsheimer writes that “the United States had strong isolationist tendencies until World War II” (2011, 18). Indeed, most accounts of US foreign policy since 1941 rely on the spoken or unspoken assumption that the United States was isolationist or aloof up until the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941.15

A different, but related, manner of using American exceptionalism to explain US foreign policy is found in the works on multilateralism by John G. Ruggie and G. John Ikenberry (Ruggie 1993, 1996; Ikenberry 2001, 2003). A multilateral vision of world order is in fact “singularly compatible with America’s collective self-conception as a nation,” argues Ruggie; indeed this vision “taps into the very idea of America” (1996, 25). Both Ruggie’s

14. Contemporary political scientists who explicitly reject the term “isolationism” are, e.g., Legro (2005), who rejects the term “isolationism” but still uses the term “separateness,” which serves much the same function in terms of breaking up US foreign policy history into a dichotomy, and Menon (2007).

15. Whether the United States was isolationist during the 1930s is a different debate, one that most recently has been critically examined by Braumoeller (2010).
Ikenberry’s arguments link the liberal founding with support for a liberal international order. Ruggie’s way of solving the “problem” of aloofness in US foreign policy history was to argue that only political efforts employing the rhetoric of American exceptionalism could inspire lasting US internationalism. Similarly, Ikenberry uses American identity to solve the puzzle of why the United States transformed into a multilateral state during the Second World War and—significantly for a liberal theorist challenging realist theories—stayed committed to multilateralism after the cold war ended. Ruggie and Ikenberry both build their understanding of American exceptionalism on Seymour Martin Lipset’s (1996), meaning that their understanding of the concept is objective (i.e., exceptional means “different,” not “better”; Ruggie 1996, 111; see also Shafer 1991; Carter 2001; Lockhart 2003). Thus, they argue, American exceptionalism understood as being a distinct model of different ethnicities coming together to form a liberal polity helped the United States understand and commit to multilateralism later.

I would argue, however, that Ruggie and Ikenberry commit a fundamental mistake when they define American exceptionalism as a set of descriptive qualities (a nation of immigrants defined by civic, as opposed to ethnic, nationalism) rather than as a national identity. The fact of different nationalities coming together to form the United States was less important to the development of the national identity than was the belief in American exceptionalism (in addition to the fact that the United States was quite homogenous in its early period). The very idea of a qualitative or objective—as opposed to normative—concept of exceptionalism is nonsensical. As historian Joyce Appleby argues, exceptionalism cannot simply mean different because all nations are different (1992, 420). Indeed, Lipset’s investigations did not convincingly argue that the United States’ political or economic institutions are more different from others (especially not when compared to England; Lind 1996).16 Trying to design studies based on the assumption that the United States is somehow more different (and therefore exceptional) than other countries is in itself an exceptionalist undertaking because the academic endeavor of investigating exceptionalism inevitably entails normative judgment.17 Furthermore, as intimated earlier, not only is it problematic for all the arguments mentioned above that they assume there was an earlier tradition of isolationism, but it is even more problematic that they assume an “exemplary” strand of American exceptionalism to be behind this illusory foreign policy tradition.

16. For a more thorough discussion, see Kammen (1993) and Rauchway (2002).
17. See, e.g., the manner in which Gaddis (2005) uses a normative concept of American exceptionalism in explaining why the United States won the cold war.
I thus argue that it is more fruitful to stop talking about exemplary and missionary identities and instead use the concept of American exceptionalism. Its function as a unifying American identity is important in itself, of course, but also important is its ability to highlight the continuities in American foreign policy—such as the early and persistent expansionism of the nineteenth century justified by manifest destiny, a later iteration of American exceptionalism. Conceptualizing American exceptionalism as an identity also allows us to avoid a meaningless discussion about a normative hierarchy of nations. American exceptionalism cannot be a truth claim. The United States is not “freer” or more democratic than “any other nation on earth” (Greene 2010). Rather, American exceptionalism is an ideology, and, as such, it actually does not matter whether the United States “is still exceptional” (Parker 2011). The United States is exceptional as long as Americans believe it to be exceptional. American exceptionalism—and US foreign policy with it—has a teleological aspect to it: what is America today will be the world tomorrow (Westad 2006, 9). Americans have always assumed that people everywhere share American political and moral ideas—“that the people left to themselves would abandon their ‘wicked’ statesmen and espouse the cause of peace and reasonableness as understood in the liberal world, and above all, in the United States” (Kohn 1957, 205). This underlies the idea that in every foreigner there is an American waiting to get out. It is an assumption that links the otherwise unlikely grouping of Woodrow Wilson, Ronald Reagan, William Jefferson Clinton, and George W. Bush and their mission to reform the world in the American image.

I have also argued for the constant “internationalism” of US foreign policy. The old thesis that America was an “isolationist” nation before being “drawn” into the dirty world of international politics after 1898 was itself a product of the implicit exceptionalism on the part of American historians. That certainly serves to explain why the Spanish-American War of 1898 and its accompanying colonial acquisitions were for a long time treated as an “aberration” in American history rather than connected with previous American imperialism in the Western Hemisphere and later American imperialism in Asia and ultimately in Europe (Paolino 1973; Hietala 1985/2003; Hunt 2007a; Hixson 2008). Rather, if one accepts continental expansion, economic intercourse, and waging wars against great and small powers (such as the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War) as evidence of internationalism, there can be no doubt that the United States was an active and eager participant in international politics from the first days of the republic. Indeed, the unilateral character of this internationalism is naturally
a consequence of exceptionalism. Thomas Jefferson thought that there was, in effect, a different code of natural law governing the two worlds, Old and New: “I strongly suspect that our geographical peculiarities may call for a different code of natural law to govern relations with other nations from that which the conditions of Europe have given rise to there” (Weinberg 1935, 29). The ideology permitting Americans to see their own nation’s rights as outweighing those of another was exceptionalism: that special mission of championing freedom and liberty on behalf of all mankind, transmitted from the “patriotic clergy who first propagated the idea of an ‘American Israel’” to the founding fathers. America was, in Thomas Jefferson’s phrase of 1805, “the world’s best hope” (Weinberg 1935, 39–40).

**CONCLUSION**

Historians of US foreign relations have concluded that isolationism in the early republic never was a real phenomenon. I have concluded that the identity said to be behind it—exemplary exceptionalism—is also illusory in the way that it has been portrayed as an independent strain of the American identity. In essence, the dichotomous view of American exceptionalism and US foreign policy does not comport with reality. Rather, the United States has always sought to expand, model, lead the way, and meddle—viewing itself as the one country chosen by God to lead the others to the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1989). One should thus reject the traditional identity dichotomy and its relationship to a foreign policy dichotomy.

Finally, American exceptionalism has been accused of explaining everything and nothing (Legro 2005, 81–83; Stephanson 2008, 372). Its function right now in the literature comes close to validating this criticism. This article does not provide enough space for the complete elaboration on my theory of how American exceptionalism can be more fruitfully used to explain US foreign policy, other than to point to American exceptionalism as a formulation of an American national identity and to indicate its connection to the discarding of the old saw of the US foreign policy tradition of isolationism or aloofness.¹⁸ Rather, this article has sought to map the existing ways of conceptualizing American exceptionalism in the contemporary literature on US foreign policy, as well as retrace its historical origins, in order to clarify its development as a belief in American uniqueness and thus point to its important function as an American identity. Its aim has been to contribute to a constructive debate on how to think about—and use as an analytical category—that concept which the Puritans imagined and about which de Tocqueville wrote.

¹⁸. But see Restad (2010) for such an attempt.
REFERENCES


