



American Exceptionalism And The Dynamics Of The U.S. Relationship With The Muslim World In The Post-Cold War Politics With Special Reference To The U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

The United States has a long tradition of placing American values at the center of its foreign policy. A belief in the uniqueness and the virtue of the American political system, when translated into foreign policy terms, offers the United States as a model for the world.

The major shift in the US policy towards the world came when the US emerged as a sole superpower with the disintegration of USSR. America is working to universalize its political and economic and the social culture of its country. America believes that its global role and mission, a responsibility to spread American values around the world, was divinely sanctified and historically preordained.

The present research work will be highlighting the US policies towards the world guided by the belief in American Exceptionalism. America has tended to believe that its institutions and values represent the universal aspirations that will ultimately be shared by people all over the world.

In the post-cold war era, particularly in the aftermath of the event of 11 September 2001, the US policies towards the Muslim world radically changed. The United States and Islam represent two major forces in contemporary world politics. The article will critically analyze the US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq after the event of 9/11, in the shadow of the US belief in American Exceptionalism.

Key Words: America, Exceptionalism, Afghanistan, Iraq, Terrorism, Intervention.

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“It is up to us in our time, to choose, and choose wisely, between the hard but necessary task of preserving peace and freedom, and the temptation to ignore our duty and blindly hope for the best while the enemies of freedom grow stronger day by day.” It was up to us then—as it is now—because we are the exceptional nation. America has guaranteed freedom, security, and peace for a larger share of humanity than any other nation in all of history. There is no other like us. There has never been-----President Ronald (1983)



1. Historical Background of American Exceptionalism

Exceptionalism is rooted specifically in American political thought that developed in contradistinction to Europe. Exceptionalism may refer to the idea that there is something different about America or there is something special about America. America's foundational narrative holds that the United States has a unique place in history, differing fundamentally from all other countries; it also emphasizes a "God-given destiny" to guide the rest of the world according to the mainstream U.S. political, social and economic worldview.¹

The concept of American Exceptionalism has no formal definition. It stems from Puritan roots that began as early as 1630 when Massachusetts Bay Colony Governor John Winthrop uttered the words a "city upon a hill". The Puritans believed that God had chosen them to lead other nations of the earth and this city was a model city for all to tag along.² For the first time, the term 'American Exceptionalism' was used by a French political philosopher and historian Alexis de Tocqueville in 1840 in his book, *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville writes, that the "position of the Americans" is "quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one."³

The belief in American Exceptionalism is a fundamental aspect of the US cultural capital and national identity. The belief that the United States, in its governance, politics, mission, and place in the world, is unique, and, in its most extreme version, qualitatively superior to other nations - abides by this day. This 'exceptionalism' has been most clearly articulated in the language of American Presidents. The US President Woodrow Wilson in 1914, said, "... what makes America unique is its duty to spread liberty abroad." During 1961, President John F. Kennedy suggests that America's distinctiveness stems from its determination to exemplify and defend freedom all over the world. "More than any other people on earth, we bear burdens and accept risks unprecedented in their size and their duration, not for ourselves alone but for all who wish to be free." Americans believe that American leadership is essential for bringing peace and harmony in the world. In the 1940s American leadership led to the victory in the World War II, and the liberation of millions from the grip of fascism. In the cold war, American leadership guaranteed the *survival of freedom* by defeating the Soviet totalitarianism. In this 21st century, it will be essential for the defeat of 'militant Islam'.⁴

1.1 America and Islam in the Post Cold War Era

End of the cold war brought a major shift in international politics. America emerged as a sole superpower on the world stage. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously proclaims, "We did not seek the position, it is ours because of our ideals and our power, and the power of our ideals." Fukuyama in his famous essay, "*End of History*", 'we are witnessing not just the end of cold war or the passing of a particular period of history, but the end of history, i.e. end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of western liberal democracy by which he meant a market or capitalist economy and an open, competitive political system as the final form of human government.'⁵ America with an unparalleled world power got the chance to show its exceptional command in its policies towards the world. End of cold war raised the prospect that the American model could become the norm, not the exception. Globalization and Americanization became synonymous. A



British historian Andrew Roberts has observed, “in the debate over whether America was born great, achieved greatness or had greatness thrust upon her, the only possible conclusion must be: all three.”⁶

America has tended to believe that its institutions and values represent the universal aspirations that will ultimately be shared by people all over the world. Modernization theorists believed that all societies pass through sequential stages of progress from "traditional" to "modern" and that the west, and in particular the United States, was the "common endpoint" to which all peoples must irresistibly move. They are inclined to think that American society appeals to people of all cultures. Its economic and political system (democracy, individual rights, the rule of law, and prosperity based on economic freedom) seemed to be making headway in all parts of the world.

While liberal democracy may have made impressive progress during the 20th century, as the century drew to a close there was an undoubted evidence of new challenges- now colored green instead of red. Death of communism' in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe did not create the opportunity for the final victory of liberal democracy. The 1990s witnessed the emergence of new agendas, often 'old' issues transformed by circumstances and perception. The revival of very different ideology, notably *political Islam* appeared to challenge the western liberal world. West is using 'greening' metaphor to describe the Religious Revivalism (Political Islam) and the Environmental concern which impacted western policy making in the 1990^s. “The green” of political Islam, in the sense that religious revivalism, is a global phenomenon and concern that has to be contained in the same way as Marxism-Leninism. Clinton administration came to call environmental problems and the rise of international terrorism as ‘borderless threats’.⁷

The resurgence of Islam, now commonly referred to as ‘Political Islam’ is either a reformist response to or reaction to liberal democratic norms.⁸ It is just another ideological alternative. Samuel Huntington described the current divide in the world as a global *clash of civilization*, and warn of a cultural war between democracy and Islam, perhaps between ‘the west and the rest’.⁹

There was the onset of a new cold war where the West's liberal democratic norms are pitted against the religious revivalist norms of political Islam. Needless to mention here that the term 'cold war' was for the first time used back in 14th century by a Spanish writer to describe the conflict between the Christian and Muslim world.¹⁰ Now in the 21st century, there is the revival of the old conflict between Christianity and Islam. The United States and Islam represent two major forces in contemporary world politics.

Following the terrorist attacks in the US on September 11, 2001, America’s approach towards the Muslim world has fundamentally changed. The people, who were suspected involvement in the event of 9/11, were all Muslims. A leading Muslim writer, Ziauddin Sardar wrote: “Islam cannot explain the action of the suicide hijackers, just as Christianity can not the gas chambers, Catholicism, the bombing at Omagh. They are acts beyond belief, by people who long ago abandoned the path of Islam.”¹¹ The US has linked terrorism with Islam to launch an Ideological war.

The end of Cold War has opened the way not to world peace but for an ideology of permanent interventionism on part of the United States. America assumes ever more ruthlessly the character of an uncontrollable Leviathan. Commenting on the US hegemony in the post-Cold War scenario, Robert Kagan and William Kristol have to



say: 'Today's International system is built not around a balance of power but around American hegemony. The international financial institutions were fashioned by American interests and serve American interests.'¹² The US started the so-called 'War on Terrorism' with one of the poorest and long-suffering countries on the earth. A shift in the US role from helping to liberate Afghanistan from the clutches of the Soviet Union to become the occupier itself. In declaring a global war on terrorism, the US was merely rationalizing its own selective war on selective opponents justified through the selective definition of terrorism and terrorist agencies.¹³

1.2 War on Terror and the US Intervention in Afghanistan

9/11 became the starting point for the United States to launch the version of the 'New World Order', though the US for the first time used the term 'New World Order' in the early 1990s after the disintegration of USSR. In the 1990s, President George Bush said, "Out of these troubled times..... a new world order can emerge..... Today that world order is struggling to be born, a world quite different from the one we have known, a world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle, a world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice, a world where the strong respect the weak."¹⁴ However, after the event of 9/11, the security policies of Bush administration appeared to have challenged the vision of a new world order based on global governance. Immediately after the 9/11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, President Bush declared an all-out war on global terrorism and emphasized that it was 'a new war, a war that will require a new way of thinking. The US was suspecting Osama Bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda, behind the event of 9/11. The US projected 'Islamic Fundamentalism' and 'International Terrorism' as new threats to replacing 'Soviet Expansionism'.¹⁵

Bush administration was going to seek out allies in the region to assist efforts to destroy Al-Qaeda bases and networks of support in Afghanistan. George W. Bush said in his address to the Joint Session of the US Congress on September 20, 2001, "Every nation, in every region now has a decision to make, 'either you are with us, or you are with terrorists.'"¹⁶ In the present world order, the US is using a heavy stick on the nations of the world to follow the lines of the sole superpower. The US does not use persuasion (whip its allies into line), as it was in the cold war when the USA and the USSR- the two leading superpowers attracted nations towards their respective blocs by using persuasion. The US decided to use a heavy hand as it assumed that persuasion seemed to its government the road to weakness. The US offered the world countries an either-or-choice (You are with us or against us), with no option to remain neutral in this war.

11 September 2001, did not mark the beginning of some remarkable new phase in global politics. Bush returned it to the brutal capitalism of earlier times. Some argue that the Bush Doctrine is grounded on liberal Wilsonianism. John Mearsheimer describes it as 'Wilsonianism with teeth.'¹⁷ Combining military with the softer tones of advancing democratic or republican ideas were well established in Wilson's Idealism that linked entry into world war-I to making the world safe for democracy and the liberal ideas with the use of force. American imperialism is much more dangerous now; its military power is virtually unchallengeable. America has always laid claim that we are different because our military actions are for the benefit of not only America but for the benefit of others. A current example is the "Global War on Terrorism".



President George Bush's state of the Union speech of January 29, 2002, referred to the threat to the US from regimes that 'sponsor terror' and that are pursuing weapons of mass destruction. To President Bush, "the states" like Iran, Iraq and North Korea "and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world." The U.S. disregarded all existing international laws and norms when it got engaged in its war against terrorism. The U.S. gave itself the right to attack any deemed 'enemy' which could be countries and regimes as well as groups or individuals since no distinction was to be made between terrorists and countries harboring them. Afghanistan became the initial theater for 'Global War on Terrorism'. On 7 October 2001, the U.S. together with British forces launched aerial and missile strikes against the Taliban regime- which had harbored Al-Qaeda since 1996- and against Al-Qaeda strongholds in Afghanistan.¹⁸

Defenders of the legitimacy of the US-led invasion argue that the invasion was an act of collective self-defense provided for under article 51 of the UN charter. Bush Administration said that the Security Council (Resolution 1368 of Sep. 12, 2001) "expresses its readiness to take all necessary steps to respond to the September 11 attacks." While critics maintain that United Nations did not approve the invasion. The bombing and invasion of Afghanistan were not legitimate self-defense under article 51 of the UN Charter because the 9/11 attacks were not "armed attacks" by another state, but rather were perpetrated by non state actors and the particular article in question does not allow for war to be waged against an individual or a group, and use of force after all other steps have been taken, and so on.¹⁹ According to FBI, out of 19 hijackers, none was from Afghanistan. In several cases, the real identities of hijackers may never be known.²⁰

The war on terror policy has several interrelated and inter-connected principles. The first is the democratization principle which demands to spread democracy throughout the world. The West believes that the weak non-democratic structures of Muslim States like Afghanistan is the breeding ground for international terrorism. To establish democratic institutions and spread liberal democracy in these states form the core of the US foreign policy choice.²¹ The US could create a situation in which it could establish a lasting geopolitical order on its own terms. Afghanistan provided a standing invitation to the US to intervene as Taliban rule of shariah law in Afghanistan was contrary to the western democratic system. In American political thinking, the rule of law is a philosophy of governance central to self-government and the exercise of individual liberty. This philosophy travels with the United States in its foreign policy activities with the rest of the world, and it forms a central part of what American exceptionalism means. Michael Ignatieff, a member of the International Commission on intervention and state sovereignty that introduced the "responsibility to protect" wrote in the *New York Times*, that democracies have special duty to enforce international norms against mass killing and international war crimes even in the absence of International authorization. The US put the Democratization and the Gender equality on the agenda to justify an endless war in Afghanistan. Laura Bush and Cherie Blair talked about liberating the women of Afghanistan at the beginning of Afghan war. The first imperial interventions for the liberation of women.²² Condoleeza Rice²³ insists, that "U.S. will fight poverty, disease, and oppression because it is the right thing to do and the smart thing to do." The US called its intervention in Afghanistan as 'a Just War.' The US is carrying a policy of "speak softly but carry a big stick, of realism a strong military and economic position. It took a unilateral approach to international development like Human Rights, Legislations,



and Regime Change etc. As a matter of fact, one cannot simply militarily intervene to overthrow a system or regime; no matter how brutal that would be. It is, in fact, the people of that country who have the democratic right to overthrow their own tyrants.²⁴ The propaganda and the rhetoric behind the new wars of “*humanitarian intervention*” are very interesting. The US propagated that Afghanistan is a “failing state” is a breeding ground for international terrorism. All George W. Bush wanted was to have a more favorable less hostile environment in Afghanistan and therefore wanted to replace the Taliban regime with a puppet regime which could dance on the tones of America. American policies are designed to transform the domestic regimes of other states to obtain client regimes and make the world safe for capitalism. How come a state is a failed state if it does not wish to implement democracy, Human Rights, and Market Economy? Today ‘failed state’ is defined according to reasoning based on western norms. US double standards are reflecting from its policies. The US sought after to establish secular political order but at the core of the heart, it is actually itself politicizing Christianity. The phrase ‘God Bless America’ which was used by American leaders after the 9/11 event, is certainly political, but it is also obviously religious. “God will deal us to victory because we are in the right, and God is for us, not for them”.²⁵ The mission is understood to derive from a religiously inspired errand to promote the US liberal democracy model in the world. A line runs from Puritan thought of seventeenth-century, to the revolution, to the mid-nineteenth-century doctrine of manifest destiny, to late nineteenth-century American imperialism, to Wilsonian idealism, to cold war anticommunism, and finally to George W. Bush’s unilateralism. These are manifestations of a common theme. Given its theological source—namely, the belief that God provides a warrant for America’s mission.²⁶ Though George Bush has not used the term *American Exceptionalism* publicly while taking the unilateral approach of intervening the other countries. However, his successor President Barack Obama, for the first time openly used the term American Exceptionalism in his election campaign of 2009.²⁷ The September 2002, ‘*National security Strategy of United States*’ put out by the Bush Administration makes the situation crystal clear. They say that the defense of free trade i.e., free trade as we see it and according to the rules that we make is a holy moral principle. And in order to defend this, we are prepared to go to war. That has been the principle of all empires.²⁸ In order to avoid the world criticism for its military actions in Afghanistan, the US took the job of state rebuilding in Afghanistan in its hand. Developmental activities and the military action against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda people in Afghanistan went side by side. No knowledgeable authority seriously questioned the UN estimate that 7.5 million Afghans need food over the winter-2.5 million more than on September 11, a 50 percent increase as a result of the threat of bombing. The U.S. bombing of Kandahar was so severe that roughly 80 percent of Afghan population of the city fled and most buildings simply collapsed, then the actuality, with a toll that will never be investigated if history is any guide.²⁹ The facts remain diminished and the history thus distorted. The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom invoked moral opposition to the war, stated, “we don’t want bombs dropped on a country where 7 million people already face starvation, 60% of them women and children ...”³⁰ West talked about liberating the women of Afghanistan at the beginning of Afghan war. The condition of women is as bad as ever, while incidents of rape have gone up.³¹ For the international community, the message was that anyone daring to oppose the world’s sole superpower would face similar consequences.



The US intervened in Iraq in 2003. Initial post-invasion plans for Iraq and Afghanistan included rule-of-law components, but efforts to advance the rule of law ran into multiple difficulties. To use a Texas saying, the Bush administration's approach to *American Exceptionalism* was all hat and no cattle. After the invasion of Iraq, the United States poured political and military resources into the country, seeking to make it a guiding light of so-called democracy in the Middle East—a goal dripping with the can-do confidence associated with American exceptionalism. More surprisingly, Iraq quickly began to disintegrate.³²

The post-invasion political and military strategies and tactics were disasters, which reflected the failure of the Bush administration to think through what is needed during an occupation to embed democratic principles and politics in a foreign land while providing population-wide security and stability. In Iraq, a quarter of a million civilian (250,000) and as many as 500,000 Iraqi children died because of the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq by the US. Iraq was denied the right to import basic equipment to clean water and to repair the sewage systems.³³ The failure to find weapons of mass destruction and the manner in which the ill-prepared, under-resourced (especially in terms of military forces to secure post-invasion Iraq), and badly conceived U.S.-led occupation descended into sectarian violence, multiple insurgencies, and unnecessary suffering among the Iraqi people mean that the invasion, occupation, and counterinsurgency rescue are hard, collectively, to sustain as an example of American Exceptionalism.³⁴

2. CONCLUSION

The end of cold war has opened the way not to world peace but for an ideology of permanent interventionism on part of the United States. The US policies towards the world are guided by the belief in American Exceptionalism. Champions of American Exceptionalism wants Americans to think of themselves as special, and they take great pride in pointing to how America is unlike other advanced democracies. America is working to universalize its political and economic and the social culture of its country. The exceptional notion among Americans after becoming a unilateral power at the world stage at the end of the cold war turned America into an exceptionally bad country. America assumes ever more ruthlessly the character of an uncontrollable Leviathan. Following the event of 9/11, 2001, America's approach towards the Muslim world has fundamentally changed. The west has made Islam the biggest enemy today. After the US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq and the epidemic of mass shootings in Iraq, American exceptionalism came to be equated with unchecked gun violence. As for spreading American values around the world, many Americans simply don't think it is worth the expenditure of blood and treasure, especially after draining war in Iraq.

The problem, globally, is that American exceptionalism has increasingly come to have negative connotations. America must be extraordinary in providing leadership to the world without arrogance. There is now a global standard that the U.S. must learn to address in order to become an exceptional world leader. This requires the U.S. to become a central partner instead of insisting the U.S. way is the only way. There are several central actions necessary for the U.S. in this new world environment. A shift to soft power as a core competency of foreign policy is essential.



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²³ Condoleeza Rice is an American political scientist, diplomat, and war criminal. From 2001-2005, she was named as National Security Advisor.

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