

# American Exceptionalism: Exemplifying Patriotism and Justifying Imperialism

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## American Exceptionalism: Exemplifying Patriotism and Justifying Imperialism

<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/08/01/american-exceptionalism-exemplifying-patriotism-and-justifying-imperialism/>

CALEB SPENCER, AUG 1 2014

On September 11, 2013, the New York Times published an op-ed piece written by Russian President Vladimir Putin which specifically attacked American foreign policy and American exceptionalism. He stated that “I would rather disagree with a case he [United States President Barack Obama] made on American exceptionalism”, adding that “It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation”.<sup>[1]</sup> This was in reference Obama’s speech on the need to intervene in Syria, delivered the day before, and which professed the responsibility of the U.S. to react with force to the use of chemical weapons in Syria, concluding “That’s what makes America different. That’s what makes us exceptional”.<sup>[2]</sup>

As will be shown in the first chapter, Obama is not the first and will almost certainly not be the last U.S. President to resort to exceptionalism. Visions of self-grandeur are not the sole predicament of U.S. Presidents either. Ken Booth, in his 1979 classic *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*, argued that “societies look at the world with their own group as the centre, they perceive and interpret other societies within their own frames of reference, and they invariably judge them inferior”.<sup>[3]</sup> However, America has become comfortable with an image of itself that is not only superior, but is exemplary — that is, American values are perceived as *universally* good and desirable. According to Michael Foley, “American identity has become closely associated with a settlement of principle that has allowed the United States to establish a self-image of exceptionalism”.<sup>[4]</sup> The settlement of principle furthermore, is “centred upon the existence of a single and integrated set of core values” such as ‘freedom’, ‘individualism’, ‘democracy’, and ‘morality’.<sup>[5]</sup> As will be discussed in the second and third chapters, American exceptionalism has become more confident and extreme since the U.S. launched the Global War on Terror (GWOT) in retaliation to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

### *The Global War on Terror*

American exceptionalism manifests itself in numerous different ways, but the most troubling for international politics was the way that American exceptionalism was explicitly proclaimed in a series of public speeches (the State of the Union address and the West Point military graduation speech) and the *National Security Strategy (NSS)* of George W. Bush and his administration in 2002. These speeches and the NSS were a proclamation of legal exceptionalism as it insisted that the U.S. “adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today’s adversaries”.<sup>[6]</sup> This was the legal basis for GWOT, and it rested on a reinterpretation of international law which gave the U.S. a right to militarily intervene in countries which it believed were harbouring terrorists, or which were believed to be supplying terrorists with Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). This self-ascribed right which was denied to other countries was an assertion of “benevolent hegemony” according to Francis Fukuyama, and “has a long history in the way that Americans think about themselves”.<sup>[7]</sup> Fukuyama, famous for his “end of history” thesis and his close association with the neoconservative (or ‘neo-con’) school of thought, has admitted that he was initially very ‘hawkish’ with regards to Iraq, advocating the use of force against Saddam Hussein as early as 1998 and only deciding that it was a bad idea “in the year immediately preceding the invasion”.<sup>[8]</sup> The reason why this is important is that the neoconservatives were a highly influential group in Bush’s first administration, and were instrumental in the decision to invade Iraq and broaden GWOT beyond Afghanistan. As Robert G Patman has observed, Bush’s administration projected a militant conception of American exceptionalism because the neoconservatives believed in

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the “historic responsibility” of the U.S. to “maintain unrivalled power and use it to spread freedom and democracy”.<sup>[9]</sup> With such a missionary zeal to its foreign policy, there was of course friction between Washington and many other Capitals across the world, but the focus of this research will be on the possible consequences of this distinctive American exceptionalism on the prosecution of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

## *American Exceptionalism and Military Effectiveness*

American exceptionalism is a discourse which, not only gives legitimacy and meaning to foreign policy (such as war), but also to the actions of individuals (including soldiers). Booth acknowledges this and argues that it “helps if the individual believes in what he is doing, believes that his own nation is superior and right, and believes that the enemy is inferior, evil and in the wrong”.<sup>[10]</sup> He also adds that “by exaggerating the alien character of the out-group”, it helps in “the ‘vilification of the human’, which makes killing easier”.<sup>[11]</sup> Booth does not discuss the possible connotations for counterinsurgency (COIN) operations such as Afghanistan and Iraq, where the enemy is not so readily identifiable, or where the cause is not as simple as the defeat of the enemy forces. For the purposes of this research, we will first try and understand and establish what exceptionalism is, then it will be important to establish where soldiers may have acted out of this belief. After establishing this, it will be possible to say with relative confidence whether this had negative effect on the conduct of U.S. operations. There are two major limitations to this method of research however. First, it will be impossible to generalise about the overall conduct of U.S. operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan based on a relatively small pool of empirical data. While one account may be seem indicative, there is a danger of coming to a false, mono-causal conclusion. Second, when in combat situations, soldiers are primarily motivated by self and group-preservation, and not always by ideological fervour. As Booth notes, “when soldiers face each other, it is no longer a question of Right and Wrong, but of winners and losers, the quick and the dead”.<sup>[12]</sup> This research will not seek to give any mono-causal conclusion, it will however draw conclusions that seem indicative from the empirical and theoretical data studied, understood in the infinitely complex study area that is human conflict. Furthermore, a study of the military leadership and some of the more common problems encountered in both Iraq and Afghanistan will help contextualise my own research, and expose any patterns that may be evident. This research will argue that indeed, discursive American exceptionalism did have a negative impact on the conduct of US forces in both direct and indirect ways, but that these must be understood in the context of other, more cultural and institutional failings in the US military in order to fully understand its true effects.

## *Methodology and Road Map*

The primary research question, which will be answered in the final chapter and conclusion, is as follows: *What effects has American exceptionalism as a discourse had on the conduct of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan?* To answer this question, two secondary research questions must be answered first. These questions are as follows. Chapter 1 will ask: *What is American exceptionalism?* Chapter 2 and 3 will ask: *How was American exceptionalism utilised in the Global War on Terror?* Ultimately, we must establish the utility of these values before we can begin to establish their possible disutility.

The first chapter, which will establish a more concrete definition of American exceptionalism, will make use of both theoretical and empirical methodology. Since American values and exceptionalism have been the subject of much study, a review of this literature is required along with a look at some empirical examples of the discursive elements of exceptionalism. The second chapter will look at the neoconservative movement and its influence on decision making in the Bush administration in order to establish the ideological foundations of the GWOT. The third chapter will encompass a discourse analysis of President Bush before the GWOT in order to determine which elements of the discourse were utilised to the fullest. The fourth chapter will be a discourse analysis of soldiers who served in Afghanistan and Iraq along with a study of some of the problems the military encountered.

According to Sandra Halperin and Oliver Heath, discourse analysis is “a qualitative type of analysis that explores the ways in which discourses give legitimacy and meaning to social practices and institutions”.<sup>[13]</sup> In the context of this research, American exceptionalism is the discourse to be analysed. This discourse is then applied to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to explore the ways in which it has given legitimacy and meaning to the conduct of both foreign

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policy and military operations. The first step will be to establish a “co-variation or association between discourse and context”; the second step is to “provide details of the process through which the power of discourse has demonstrable effects”. The context can be one of two kinds: “local”, which includes “the immediate task and situation, the source, message, channel, and intended audience of the communication”; or the “broad”, which includes the “cultural norms and assumptions, knowledge, beliefs and values, the resources and strategies characteristic of a community’s general cultural resources”.<sup>[14]</sup> The broad context will be established in the first chapter, while the local context will be determined specifically to each tier of analysis, as described above.<sup>[15]</sup> At the second stage then, the third and fourth chapters will each show the power of the discourse and its effects at each level of analysis.

One weakness of discourse analysis is that it is a largely subjective interpretation, that is, it is reliable enough to establish patterns between discourse and reality, but it is another thing to interpret the meaning of these patterns accurately. As Gillian Brown and George Yule have shown, because the discourse analyst has “no direct access to the speaker’s intended meaning in producing an utterance, he often has to rely on a process of inference to arrive at an interpretation”. To overcome this, they add, the analyst must apply “socio-cultural knowledge”.<sup>[16]</sup> Similarly, Halperin and Heath argue that what is required is “an understanding of meanings and intentions employed by social actors”.<sup>[17]</sup> By first attempting to describe and account for American values, this research will attempt to avoid any unfounded assumptions that may come as a result of cultural ignorance.

## CHAPTER ONE: American Exceptionalism

The term ‘American exceptionalism’ used here does not imply an inherent arrogance in the American psyche, rather, it implies a certain self-image of America’s role in the world which has grown out of a particularly exceptional historic experience, and continues to be exemplified through a closely related nexus of values and beliefs which can best be described as an ideology. Seymour Martin Lipset has argued that American exceptionalism is not the belief that “America is better than other countries or has a superior culture”, but rather, it is the belief that America is “qualitatively different, that it is an outlier”.<sup>[18]</sup> This definition rests on a particularly binary reading of history and geography that places the United States in one camp, and the rest of the world in another. We could say that every nation in the world is ‘qualitatively different’ from every other nation in the world and this would be relatively uncontroversial. What is more telling in Lipset’s definition is his denial that American exceptionalism is the belief in American superiority, since it is this characteristic which, this chapter will argue, is the defining characteristic implicit in American exceptionalism. A helpful definition which shall be used here and in the following chapters will be borrowed from Robert G Patman, who defines American exceptionalism as:

“...an informal ideology that endows Americans with a pervasive faith in the uniqueness, immutability and superiority of the country’s founding liberal principles, and also with the conviction that the USA has a special destiny among nations”.<sup>[19]</sup>

This special destiny has been perceived by successive U.S. president’s as a responsibility to spread American conceptions of liberty and democracy to parts of the world deemed ‘uncivilized’ or ‘savage’.<sup>[20]</sup> What’s more, these presidents have consistently referred to America’s mission in moralistic terms as battles of ‘good versus evil’,<sup>[21]</sup> and assumed other’s perceptions of their benevolent intentions.

This chapter will seek to map out and account for the most important features of American exceptionalism as a national ideology. This will be approached through an examination of three values in particular: freedom; democracy; and morality. As Michael Foley has pointed out, the American value system cannot be summed up with one value, rather it “consists of a complex of values”.<sup>[22]</sup> The nature of each value will be established and subjected to historical inquiry in order to determine its origins and historical precedents. Finally, the chapter will conclude by summarizing American exceptionalism as a national foreign-policy ideology.

### *Freedom*

If we are to fully understand the American creed, there is no better place to start than with ‘freedom’. Although, as

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was argued above, the American value system cannot be fully accounted for without recourse to the value system as a whole, it can be said that freedom is so central to it that it is the basis of the American ideology. Foley neatly and eloquently explains its importance as a value:

“The concept of freedom lies at the heart of American identity. It is at one and the same time a foundational ethic, a cultural reference point, a defining ideal, a controlling precept, a depiction of social reality, a medium of political exchange, a mobilizing source of aspiration, and a device of historical and political explanation”. [23]

The centrality of freedom can be traced back to the birth of the United States as a nation, which was the first Republic to free itself from the colonial rule of a European power. Naturally, emancipation and freedom has become part of the American historic narrative. In 1776 for example, a British colonial immigrant to America, Thomas Paine, wrote and published an extremely popular pamphlet called “Common Sense”, in which he forcefully argued that America was to become “the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty”. [24] As Foley points out, “America is often reputed to be the first entirely new nation, free from the past, free from historical processes, and, therefore, free from the intractable restrictions upon liberty found elsewhere”. [25] However, narratives that have explained the history of the United States solely in the terms of freedom have tended to eclipse a more indigenous and equally legitimate narrative: the ‘western expansion’ of the American nation involved the colonisation, dispossession, and subjugation of the Native American and Mexican peoples. As historian Thomas Bender has argued, “Dispossession and colonial rule has been a central if unacknowledged themes in American history”. [26] Not only this, but it is worth remembering that a nation which differentiates itself on the championing of individual liberty should so systematically have relied on the labour of black slaves. [27]

The genuineness of this claim to true liberty is not important here, what is important is to note is that due to the revolutionary nature by which America became an independent nation, freedom became the all-important value by which Americans defined themselves. When America achieved great power status and began to exert this power on the world stage, its foreign policy began to be framed in the language of freedom: On America’s entry into World War I, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson talked of the need to “make the world itself at last free”; [28] President Franklin D Roosevelt defined American involvement in World War II as a choice between “human slavery and human freedom”; [29] President Harry S Truman spoke of America’s responsibility to the world in maintaining “guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression”; [30] and John F Kennedy’s famous “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty” was his Cold War rallying call to America. [31] As Foley notes, “An American crisis, therefore, is always defined as both a crisis *of* liberty and a crisis *for* liberty”. [32] It is the utility of freedom as a mobilizing force in American political discourse which has determined its frequent and consistent use. Implicit in all of these accounts is the assumption that the U.S. can and should be the global force for good in the world, and it is this which Michael Hunt argues, constitutes a ‘foreign-policy ideology’. What’s more, the power of this ideology, as Hunt sees it, is reliant on the connection between ‘foreign-policy ideology’ and American nationalism. [33] American exceptionalism as is defined here is synonymous with Hunt’s ‘foreign-policy ideology’. As will be discussed now, freedom as a value is closely associated with two other values which help constitute American exceptionalism, ‘democracy’ and ‘morality’.

## *Democracy*

Closely connected to, but separate from the idea of freedom in the American value complex is democracy. Democracy is frequently used synonymously with freedom in the American political discourse as it is seen as the truest political and philosophical embodiment of freedom, and it is through democracy that the American ideology truly sees itself as exemplary. Foley argues that “American democracy is widely perceived, particularly in the United States itself, as amounting to a quintessential model of democratic order. The ubiquitous claim is that the United States is the one nation authentically dedicated to the principles and practices of democracy”. [34] After World War II, America assumed the role of leader of the democratic, capitalist world, against what was perceived as the scourge of totalitarian communist rule. As Truman defined it in 1950, there was now “a basic conflict between the idea of freedom under a government of laws, and the idea of slavery under the grim oligarchy of the Kremlin”. [35] America by 1950 had reason to be proud, its involvement in promoting international institutions and the prosperity of post-war

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Europe had saved millions from famine through the Marshall Plan, helped lay the foundations for the modern day European Union (E.U.), and had been instrumental in the founding of the United Nations (U.N.).[36] This must be understood in the context of the breakdown in the wartime alliance of the U.S. and Soviet Union, and the beginning of the Cold War which meant a more ideological approach to foreign policy. America's spread of democracy accelerated massively under Kennedy in the early 1960s in what was known as 'Development Policy'. The underlying assumption which formed the basis of development policy was that communist totalitarian regimes depended on a level of poverty, and civil and political underdevelopment in order to flourish. The aim then, was to win over the popular opinion of the Third World by a policy of economic and political development, to build "a democratic, open society".[37]

The problems with development policy, as Hunt argues, were two-fold: first, the need to bring a country into the America's sphere of influence and away from left-leaning tendencies, sometimes meant that the U.S. backed their own dictators at the expense of the liberty and democracy which informed their ideology; second, development policy was inherently "condescending and paternalistic" since it relied on the ethnocentric assumptions that came with judgements of modernity and progress.[38] More than one commentator has drawn parallels between twentieth century American foreign policy and the foreign policy of the nineteenth century British Empire.[39] Both foreign policies sought to bring similar conceptions of 'civilization' to parts of the Third World, driven by material interests but also by an intense belief in the universal legitimacy of white European civilization, and both ultimately entailed the subjugation of an indigenous population. The difference with the American case is that it was in response to the threat of communism, which helped define the American position as ideologically opposed to the ideology of 'the Other'.[40] American conceptions of freedom and democracy and the reverence held by Americans for these values coupled with an ideological commitment to these values in matters of foreign policy, has led to another important characteristic of American exceptionalism: delusions of benevolence. Hunt has argued that the American belief is as follows: "Where others seek to exploit and repress...Americans seek only to protect and guide".[41] This is not new to American foreign policy and has formed an important component in the way Americans have claimed exceptionalism. For example, Woodrow Wilson would frequently claim that it was the United States who had "no selfish motives" when comparing his country's foreign policy with those of the European powers.[42] As will now be discussed, this comes from a genuine belief inherent in American exceptionalism that it is not only the responsibility of the U.S. to promote freedom and democracy, but it is its moral purpose and manifest destiny.

## *Morality*

The most striking element of America's foreign policy, which constitutes a very important and distinctive element of it, is that it is without exception framed in terms of a moral duty. As Lipset has argued, "Americans must define their role in a conflict as being on God's side against Satan -for morality, against evil", and America is, he adds, "the most moralistic country in the developed world".[43] Here again we see a part of the American identity which complements and reinforces other elements of it, and which is indivisible from the creation of the American nation. The place of moralism has its origins in the historic religious experience of the United States. Foley explains that Puritanism was and remains a significant element in American culture as it represents "that platform of principles and impulses *from* which America developed intellectually, and *to* which much of its subsequent developments can be related back".[44] Barbara Hinckley has argued that the president is at the centre of America's moral universe because "they preach, reminding the American people of moral and religious principles and urging them to conduct themselves in accord with these principles".[45] President Franklin Roosevelt publically asked for "divine guidance...to give light to them that sit in darkness";[46] President Richard Nixon asked for "your prayers that in the years ahead I may have God's help in making decisions that are right for America";[47] President Ronald Reagan talked of America being a "nation under God, and I believe God intended for us to be free";[48] and President Bill Clinton, in his first inaugural address said "We have changed the guard. And now, each in our way, and with God's help, we must answer the call".[49] In other secular democratic nations, such talk of God by politicians would be unthinkable, but in America, as Foley argues, "the moral and political spheres are so thoroughly intermixed that they remain largely indistinguishable from one another".[50]

Not only does religion endow the president with a heightened image of legitimacy and moral worth, but Puritanism has also given theological legitimacy to the belief in American exceptionalism. The New England Puritans believed

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that their departure from the 'Old World' of Europe to the 'New World' settlements in America constituted "wholly exceptional monuments to biblical ordinance and divine grace". From this belief came a national narrative of being the 'chosen people', which then helped determine America as a "city upon a hill", where the "eyes of all people are upon us".[51] Here are the origins of the missionary element in American exceptionalism, which has to a large extent influenced foreign policy for the last century and in particular since 1950. As Hunt points out, "Americans increasingly understood their redemptive role in active, missionary terms rather than merely passive and exemplary ones". American values of freedom and democracy lose a merely exemplary status when they are understood in the context of America's intense Christian background. Americans become "saviours with a duty to reach out to enslaved and backward peoples".[52] American foreign policy has at times swung between an impulse towards isolationism and its stronger impulse towards missionary exceptionalism. In the interwar years for example, Wilson's internationalism was heavily criticised and the public appeared to agree with this conclusion. This view was exemplified in the popularity of Republican Senator William E. Borah between 1925 and 1933, who believed that being a passive exemplar was enough and would lead to the betterment of American society at home.[53] It is the argument of this chapter that when Christian missionary values are integrated into American foreign policy, what results is a troubling and hypocritical moral absolutism which serves to alienate other peoples and frustrate the pursuit of legitimate strategic goals. The next chapters will examine American exceptionalism as a political discourse during the Global War on Terror.

## CHAPTER TWO: Ideological Foundations of the Global War on Terror

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11 hereafter), have been the defining political and strategic event of the twenty-first century. On the morning of 9/11, four separate aeroplanes (American Airlines Flights 11 and 77, and United Airlines Flights 175 and 93) were hijacked soon after leaving airports across the North-East of the United States. Two of these aircraft (AA Flight 11 and UA Flight 175) were flown into both towers of the World Trade Centre (WTC) in New York, another (AA Flight 77) was flown into the Pentagon in Washington, and the other hijacked aircraft (UA Flight 93), which is believed to have been intended for the Capitol or The White House in Washington, crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after a group of passengers overpowered the hijackers.[54] The symbolism of the targets were huge: the WTC embodied the sheer economic power and omnipotence of American neo-liberalism; the Pentagon, the home of the US Department of Defence (DOD), represented the unrivalled size and strength of the US military; and either of the potential intended targets in Washington are national and international symbols of Western democracy. The symbolism was significant, but as Stephen Brooks has argued, of more significance historically speaking, was the fact that any attacks occurred in the first place.[55] One of the reasons that American exceptionalism has been able to flourish is the fact that the United States is geographically isolated from the rest of the 'developed' world, and naturally, has been very difficult to attack.

The response of the Bush administration was to become known as the Global War on Terror (GWOT), set out in a series of speeches and in the 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (NSS). The invasion of Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), which began with airstrikes on October 7 2001,[56] was arguably a logical reaction to the attacks of 9/11: Al Qaeda were identified as the perpetrators, they were known to have been operating out of Afghanistan with the complicity of the Taliban regime, therefore, Bush could claim that it was an act of self-defence.[57] Whether one agrees with the strategic rationale behind OEF (Al Qaeda was a relatively miniscule organisation comprising of around 1,000 members,[58] and given the audacity of the 9/11 attacks and the nature of the organization, were unlikely to attempt an attack again for a very long time), it was widely considered a legitimate response to the horrific attacks of 9/11.[59] For the Bush administration however, the danger didn't stop there. Over the next year or so, President Bush and his inner circle of neoconservatives set about justifying pre-emptive war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, arguing that Saddam possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) which he was intent on supplying to Al Qaeda.[60] Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF –note the use of the word 'freedom' to label both wars) was launched with a failed attempt on the life of Saddam Hussein on March 20 2003, with the ground attack starting at dawn the next day.[61] By October 2004, Bush knew there had been no WMD, or production of WMD in Iraq since 1991 –Bush had been told this information in January 2004, but refused to believe it and asked for a second opinion –and soon after, it became clear that there had been no links between Iraq and Al Qaeda, and by extension, the 9/11 attacks.[62] What's more, OIF was, in the words of one of the most highly regarded historians of the Iraq war, Thomas E. Ricks, "based on perhaps the worst war plan in American

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History”, [63] and a recent academic study has put the number of deaths due to “war-related causes” in Iraq at half-a-million people. [64]

The previous chapter examined the historical origins and precedents of American exceptionalism. This chapter and the next will attempt to account for and demonstrate not only continuity in this discourse under Bush, but a striking increase in the militarism of this discourse. To understand the intellectual and ideological foundations of Bush’s foreign policy, this chapter will discuss the neoconservative movement and its influence on the Bush administration.

## *The ‘Neocons’*

According to Justin Vaïse, author of *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*, neoconservatism “resonates with certain deep currents in the American psyche”, and is a “reincarnation of Wilsonianism in a new, more martial form”. Because it is so difficult to define, there has been debate in the field about which tradition neoconservatism actually belongs to, conservatism or liberalism, or where it might lie in the spectrum. On matters of foreign policy –with which this research is chiefly concerned –Vaïse argues that neoconservatism shares more with liberalism than it does with conservatism. He cites their “Wilsonianism, their moralism, their penchant for upsetting the status quo, and their defence...of a strong state with a powerful military” as reasons for this. [65] For Jean-François Drolet, this is not only wrong but “naïve”. [66] Part of his argument is worth quoting in full:

“Neoconservatives are no Nazis. But the discursive strategies and political practices with which they have sought to address what they perceive as the weaknesses of the American liberal tradition over the years, are drawn straight out of the theoretical repertoire of European fascism”. [67]

Like fascism, Drolet argues, neoconservatism relies on “cultivating a level of limited but endemic conflict in the international system and nurturing its support base in the name of an expansive foreign policy”. [68] Neoconservatism is similar to fascism in its ethnocentric universalism –the idea that your own culture is superior and universally desirable. The distinction lies in the substance of that ethnocentrism. Whereas fascism relies on the superiority of race and by implication the eradication of other race(s), neoconservatism relies on the superiority of values and the universality of those values. The eradication that is proposed in neoconservatism then, is not human but ideological: by promoting American ideology, other ideologies become obsolete. This idea of being in a permanent state of enmity is fully consistent with American exceptionalism. [69] What is so worrying about the neoconservative form is that it is so inherently confrontational and imperialistic.

The term ‘Wilsonianism’ has become synonymous with American foreign policy exceptionalism, because, as Godfrey Hodgson has observed, “especially since Woodrow Wilson, exceptionalists have proclaimed that the United States has a destiny and a duty to expand its power and the influence of its institutions and its beliefs until they dominate the world”. [70] It is just this Wilsonian rhetoric which Vaïse has argued, was consistently employed by President Bush. [71] Neoconservatives that were prominent in the Bush administration such as Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, and Elliot Abrams, became vocal opponents of “détente” in the 1970s. [72] For the neoconservatives, any relaxation in relations between America and the Soviet Union was tantamount to an acceptance of evil, and they vehemently rejected any arms control agreements with the Soviet Union on these moralistic grounds. [73] This was, according to Fred Kaplan, the same idea that inspired Bush’s policy towards Saddam Hussein. [74] However, as many commentators have noted, the neoconservatives of the Bush administration represent a new, less compromising, ideologically militant form of American exceptionalism. [75] During the 1990s, a neoconservative group called the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) became prominent within Republican circles in Washington and consisted of people such as Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, and Dick Cheney. In 1992, the DOD, supervised by Wolfowitz, drafted a document called the *Defence Planning Guidance* (DPG), which set out America’s post-Cold War strategy. This document proposed a strategy which aimed to deter any potential great-power competitor, defend areas of key strategic importance, secure and expand democracy, and to exploit the transformation of war. Although the DPG was leaked to the New York Times before it was officially published, and subsequently re-written, then Secretary of Defence and future Vice President Dick Cheney, told Wolfowitz that he like what the DPG proposed. [76] What’s more, shortly after their birth in 1997, PNAC had become obsessed with the threat that Saddam Hussein supposedly posed to American interests, and in 1998, called on President Clinton to

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remove him. The reasons they cited were threats to American troops in the region, the threat to Israel, and the threat to “moderate” states in the region and the supply of oil.[77] Naturally then, when prominent PNAC members were appointed to highly influential positions in the Bush administration, these strategic concerns and this ideological strategic outlook quickly became policy.

PNACs vision for American foreign policy and military strategy was proclaimed in a document which amounts to a blueprint for American imperialism, *Rebuilding America's Defences: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century* (RAD). Published in September 2000, RAD states that “while the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein”.[78] Along the lines of the DPG, RAD set out four core missions for the US military: first, “defend the homeland”; second, “fight and decisively win multiple, simultaneous major theatre wars”; third, “perform the ‘constabulary’ duties associated with shaping the security environment in critical regions”; and finally, “transform U.S. forces to exploit the “revolution in military affairs”.[79] As Patman and others have pointed out and George Bush has admitted in his memoirs *Decision Points*, very soon after 9/11, senior neoconservatives in the administration such as I Lewis Libby and Wolfowitz were calling for the invasion of Iraq.[80] What is remarkably clear about neoconservatives is that the events of 9/11 presented them with a glorious opportunity to further their ideological agenda. Inherent in their world view was the assumption that the spread of democracy and American values abroad, would not only enrich the lives of others by bringing them peace, but would also serve American material interests. As Kaplan puts it, “American might and moral right were synonymous”.[81] This claim to moral superiority was at odds with their policy towards international institutions and treaties. This will be discussed in more detail in relation to military conduct in a later chapter, but it is worth noting briefly here. For a country that prides itself on being a leader on matters of human rights, it seems obscene that America is alone with Somalia in its non-accession to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and joins only Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia in defying the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights’ (ICCPR) prohibition on the execution of juvenile offenders.[82] Neoconservatives represent a particularly dark and cancerous form of American exceptionalism, a form that is inherently aggressive and imperialistic, and a form which equates its own self-interest with the good of all humanity.

## CHAPTER THREE: ‘The Bush Doctrine’

The ‘Bush Doctrine’ refers to the strategy of pre-emptive war that was laid out by President Bush in a series of speeches and in the 2002 NSS in response to the attacks of 9/11. This analysis is not primarily concerned with the strategic justifications offered for the invasion of Afghanistan or Iraq. It is however, concerned with the use of certain discursive elements identified in the first and second chapter as constituting discursive American exceptionalism. Exceptionalistic rhetoric cannot always be categorised as ideological however, and as discussed, has been used synonymously with a realist discourse where Americans have professed the strategic benefits of this ideology. The following analysis will: first, pick out and examine elements of important speeches delivered by President Bush in the context of the previous chapters on American exceptionalism and neoconservatism; and finally, the NSS of September 2002 will be subjected to the same analysis. By contrasting Bush’s exceptionalism with historic exceptionalism already discussed, we will be able to determine the elements of it that are thought to exert the most power while using an historic framework to see where and how they differ.

*State of the Union Address, 29 January 2002*

Article II Section 3 of the United States Constitution mandates that the president “shall from time to time give to the Congress information of the state of the union, and recommend to their consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient”. This is generally given annually and is a platform for the president to update the nation on matters of domestic and foreign policy.[83] President Bush’s address, coming as it did just months after the attacks of 9/11 and the launch of OEF, laid out a strategic and ideological justification for his GWOT. His State of the Union Address began to talk of the links between terrorism and the regimes that sponsor them, stating famously that “States like these and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world”.[84] This is quite obviously a reference to the World War II Axis powers, and leans heavily on the moral absolutism of exceptionalism: to look at these regimes in any other light becomes non-negotiable because they are



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'evil'. The regimes he names as constituting this axis are North Korea, Iran and Iraq. What is striking is that when condemning these regimes, Bush does so moralistically with heavy reference to freedom and democracy: "North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens"; "Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom"; and stating that the Iraqi regime is "a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens, leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children".[85] Forgetting the fact that his reference to the axis powers does not hold up to historic examination,[86] or that America had no case for the moral high-ground over Iraq's chemical weapons,[87] one can begin to see which elements of the discourse are most relied upon by Bush in order to justify a proposition.

This speech was consistent with American exceptionalism both in its belief in America's global leadership, and in its missionary rhetoric. For example, Bush declared that "America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere", and that "we've been called to a unique role in human events". These statements reminded the American people of how important America is to the world, before reminding them of their civilising mission: "America needs citizens to extend the compassion of our country to every part of the world", which requires a "new effort to encourage development and education and opportunity in the Islamic world".[88] The State of the Union Address was light on the strategic rationale, but heavy on the ideological justification. Bush utilised the key values of liberty, freedom, and morality to mobilise public opinion. As Michael Foley has commented, "President Bush applied pressure in precisely the way that previous presidents had done in the past. He connected events to the touchstone of American identity and, thereby, maximized the potential for social cohesion and national purpose".[89]

*Speech at West Point Military Academy, June 1 2002*

President Bush's speech at the West Point military academy is highly significant because of the importance of the institution in the first place, but also because of the symbolism of personally addressing the soldiers who would come to fight and die for his GWOT. As Alastair Finlan points out, "The influence of the United States Military Academy or West Point is unparalleled, and draws considerable cultural capital from its link with George Washington".[90] Bush acknowledges as much in his own exceptionalistic language: "The United States Military Academy is the guardian of values that have shaped the soldiers who have shaped the world".[91] The speech was replete with references to America's historic role and duty in the world, to spread freedom and fight evil. Referring to the Second World War and the attacks of Pearl Harbour, he repeated General Marshall's words that "our flag will be recognised throughout the world as a symbol of freedom on the one hand, and of overwhelming power on the other". During the Cold War, he said that John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan had "refused to gloss over the brutality of tyrants", and "gave hope to prisoners and dissidents and exiles, and rallied free nations to a great cause". Here again, we see the utility of freedom in the exceptionalist discourse, although in this speech it is married to a distinctly military form of nostalgia. From this nostalgia, Bush utilises historic American exceptionalism and uses it to justify the GWOT. For example, he says that "Our nation's cause has always been larger than our nation's defense"; and "Building this just peace is America's opportunity, and America's duty". Just as Bush did in the State of the Union Address, he structured his argument in moralistic discourse. At West Point however, this was far more explicit: "Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree...We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name". The obvious implication here is that America embodies goodness, defined in its opposition to evil. Consequently, any person, organization, or state that is identified as an enemy of the US, is at once labelled evil. Finally, Bush continues to equate the security of America with global peace: "We will not leave the safety of America and the peace of the planet at the mercy of a few mad terrorists and tyrants".[92] As discussed, American presidents have long justified their participation in wars in terms of their responsibility to the world, and Bush enthusiastically continued this tradition.

*Address to the Republican National Convention, 2 September 2004*

Having established that Bush has relied heavily on an exceptionalistic discourse in order to justify his GWOT, it is important to look at a speech of his at a time when the material reasons for the invasion of Iraq were cast in serious doubt.[93] One would assume that the level of ideological discourse would increase while the more strategic rationale

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would become secondary. This assumption would be correct. More than either of the two speeches already discussed, the Republican Convention speech is starkly exceptionalistic. It really highlights which elements resonate most deeply and which give the nation its sense of purpose. When discussing the successes of GWOT, Bush said that:

“Today, the government of a free Afghanistan is fighting terror, Pakistan is capturing terrorist leaders, Saudi Arabia is making raids and arrests, Libya is dismantling its weapons programs, the army of a free Iraq is fighting for freedom, and more than three-quarters of al-Qaeda’s key members and associates have been detained or killed”.[94]

It seems peculiar that he defines the successes of all theatres of GWOT but Iraq, in terms of fighting terrorism. For Iraq, he doesn’t simply fall back on freedom however: “Because we acted to defend our country, the murderous regimes of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban are history, more than 50 million people have been liberated, and democracy is coming to the broader Middle East”.[95] Here, in one sentence, Bush does four things: first, he establishes that GWOT has helped secure America; second, he makes this morally palatable by professing to have “liberated 50 million people”; third, and closely related to the second, he claims to have helped spread democracy in the Middle East; and finally, by stating that he “acted to defend our freedom” and following up with positive moral accomplishments, he implicitly equates American security with the welfare of others.

The missionary rhetoric of this speech is another exceptionalistic element which surpasses that of previous speeches:

“Our troops know the historic importance of our work. One Army Specialist wrote home: “We are transforming a once sick society into a hopeful place. The various terrorist enemies we are facing in Iraq,” he continued, “are really aiming at you back in the United States. This is a test of will for our country. We soldiers of yours are doing great and scoring victories and confronting the evil terrorists.”[96]

It is not known for certain whether this account of a soldier’s letter home is genuine or not, but one suspects not. Even if it was not genuine, the fact that Bush uses it in a speech tells us enough about the message he is trying to convey: America’s military is protecting the US from “evil terrorists” and healing Iraq’s “sick society” at the same time. He goes on: “I am proud that our country remains the hope of the oppressed, and the greatest force for good on this earth”. Also, not for the first time, Bush uses religious language as if to give his missionary strategy the blessing of God: “I believe that America is called to lead the cause of freedom in a new century”; “freedom is not America’s gift to the world, it is almighty God’s gift to every man and woman in this world”; and, “Like generations before us, we have a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom”.[97] Foley has argued that President Bush stands out among US presidents in his utilisation of “moral conscience and religious inflection”.[98] This speech would surely reinforce that argument.

*The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, September 2002*

Stanley Hoffmann has argued that the 2002 NSS “amounts to a doctrine of global domination, inspired by the fact of U.S. might, founded on the assumption that America’s values are universally cherished except by nasty tyrants and evil terrorists”. What’s more, he argues that it contains within it all the new aspects of exceptionalism: “pre-emption; rogue states; military preponderance; and exemptionalism”.[99] As discussed, the new neoconservative form of exceptionalism is highly reliant on increased militarism. The NSS is highly militant, although it justifies itself through a mix of realism, idealism and benevolence. For example, the NSS claims that “we do not use our strength to press for unilateral advantage. We seek instead to create a balance of power that favours human freedom”.[100] Note the surprising use of the terms “balance of power” and “human freedom” in the same sentence. The most striking element of the NSS however, was the case it made for pre-emptive war. Realising that the concept of pre-emptive war lay in the no-man’s-land between international law and a state’s right to self-defence, the NSS claimed that the US “must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today’s adversaries”.[101] In international law, the act of aggression is the highest of crimes, and the use of violence is only permissible where self-defence can be proven. Technically, pre-emptive war is illegal since the act of aggression has yet to be brought into being, therefore the case for self-defence is reliant on prediction. However, Just War theorists have deemed pre-

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emption a legitimate means of self-defence in certain circumstances.[102] In what amounts to an incredible feat of hypocrisy, the NSS goes on to demand that other states do not “use pre-emption as a pretext for aggression”. [103] As discussed previously, pre-emption is justified by the claim to links between terrorists and states: “Given the goals of rogue states and terrorists, the United States can no longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past”. [104] As Thomas E. Ricks has noted, this strategy was “an astonishing departure from decades of practice and two centuries of tradition”. [105]

This central claim of the NSS is, according to Francis Fukuyama (an academic who once identified himself as a neoconservative, and who was a member of PNAC) based on an “implicit judgement that the United States is different from other countries and can be trusted to use its military power justly and wisely in ways that other powers could not”. It is, he says, a claim to “benevolent hegemony”. [106] The NSS talks of the US’s “unparalleled responsibilities, obligations, and opportunity”, and of a “moral imperative” to include “the world’s poor in an expanding circle of development”. [107] It is reminiscent of the paternalistic and patronising tendencies that the US displayed during the Cold War, as discussed in the first chapter. If the claim to exceptionalism was in any doubt, the NSS shows a complete disregard for international legal institutions that it expects others to remain party to:

“We will take the actions necessary to ensure that our efforts to meet our global security commitments and protect Americans are not impaired by the potential for investigations, inquiry, or prosecution by the International Criminal Court (ICC), whose jurisdiction does not extend to Americans and which we do not accept”. [108]

In essence, this says that Americans are free to commit war crimes and remain immune to prosecution by the ICC. The implications of this will be discussed in a later chapter, but it is worth noting that the ICC was established on the basis of the Nuremburg and Tokyo trials after the Second World War, and is intended to prosecute those who have been involved in “genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes”. [109]

## CHAPTER FOUR: Implications for the US Military

Thus far, we have seen how the Bush administration has utilised an historic discourse of exceptionalism to justify a Global War on Terror. This discourse has not only defined America’s role as necessary for the security of the United States and the Western World, but it has defined its role as a civilizing moral crusade to bring “freedom” and “democracy” to the Middle East. This chapter is primarily concerned with the disutility of this discourse at the operational level of the GWOT. By emphasising the enemy as “evil terrorists”, and implying that the Iraqi and Afghan population would benefit from US military intervention, the author argues that the Bush administration facilitated an environment of impunity when dealing with the civilian populations. In actuality, one can only speculate as to the cultural causes of atrocities in war. This is not a ‘witch hunt’, and despite the undoubted presence of atrocities by British and other forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, the purpose of this research is to account for the difficulties experienced by American forces, and determine whether the discourse of American exceptionalism employed by Bush and his administration *may* help explain these difficulties. As discussed in the introduction, the complexity of human conflict means that any mono-causal relationship would be false. By and large, American forces were brave, honourable and acted as one would expect of a professional Army in a combat zone.

The first section will examine the importance of discipline in military operations so that we can justifiably apply the term ‘disutility’ where we see instances of indiscipline. The second section will address the institutional and cultural causes of military indiscipline in the following order: first, US military culture; and second, poor leadership. The final section will deal with the following elements of exceptionalism in the context of Iraq and Afghanistan to determine their effects: first, “exemptionalism”; second, moral absolutism; and finally, American missionary purpose. This chapter will argue that although the institutional and cultural failings of the US military in the GWOT do help explain many cases of indiscipline, when we apply American exceptionalism as a framework, we can see clear relationships between the discursive strategies employed by the Bush administration and the indiscipline of some US soldiers that may otherwise be invisible. What’s more, this discourse has had negative military implications for the successful conduct of the GWOT.

### *Discipline in War*

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The fair treatment of non-combatants in war is not only morally required, but is also codified in international law and widely accepted as militarily prudent. Michael Walzer's highly influential book, *Just and Unjust Wars*, is a powerful moral argument that deals with crimes of war (*jus ad bellum*) and crimes in war (*jus in bello*). Walzer notes the argument of Henry Sidgwick, who stated that it was impermissible to do "any mischief which does not tend materially to the end [of victory], nor any mischief of which the conduciveness to the end is slight in comparison with the amount of the mischief". Walzer explains that the "mischief" Sidgwick talks of is "excessive harm".<sup>[110]</sup> For Walzer, as for international law governing the conduct of war, belligerents must make an effort to limit the brutality of war to the combatants engaged in fighting. The Geneva Conventions and Protocols affirm the rights of noncombatants (including enemy Prisoners of War) to have "their lives, dignity, personal rights and convictions" respected.[111] Walzer's discussion of the moral status of civilians is very helpful to understand the distinction in rights between soldiers and noncombatants: "We are all immune to start with; our right not to be attacked is a feature of normal human relationships. That right is lost by those who bear arms "effectively" because they pose a danger to other people. It is retained by those who don't bear arms at all".[112]

The margin for "mischief" in Counterinsurgency (COIN) wars (such as those fought by the US in Afghanistan and Iraq) becomes very small indeed, because, to quote the 2006 US Army/Marine Corps COIN Field Manual (FM), "preserving noncombatant lives and dignity is central to mission accomplishment".[113] The utility of discipline is further intensified when we consider the professed purpose of the GWOT: to defeat global terrorism. By treating civilians poorly, the strategic goal of defeating terrorism is made significantly more difficult. To again borrow Sidgwick's argument, the utility in reducing or eliminating "mischief" is to reduce the "danger of provoking reprisals and causing bitterness that will long outlast".[114] In other words, atrocities or perceived injustices only fuel negative sentiments and therefore make peace and security more difficult. This has an effect that is not dissimilar to a self-fulfilling prophecy: a "false definition of a situation which makes the originally false conception come true".[115] If we also take American exceptionalism as a form of ethnocentrism, it is interesting to note Ken Booth's argument that "Ethnocentrism is characteristically associated with the phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy", where a highly ethnocentric group "may actually seriously decrease their overall security by increasing the number of dangerous situations in which they get involved".[116]

## *Institutional and Cultural Causes of Indiscipline*

The US military went into the GWOT fundamentally unprepared for the type of war that followed the very quick and decisive military victories against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Saddam Hussein's Army in Iraq. It has been widely and convincingly argued by many respected observers that significant harm was done in both OEF and OIF, because the US military refused to recognise that in order to win a COIN operation, completely different strategies and tactics were required.[117] Former British Lieutenant-Colonel Tim Collins has echoed this sentiment, stating that "The United States' performance initially, was unimpressive, in terms of, they were impressive militarily, they quickly conquered the Iraqis but had no idea what to expect and fared poorly in the beginnings of the insurgency".[118] A US Army soldier that was spoken to for this research, Chris Miller, who served in Iraq between April 2003 and July 2004, and again between November 2005 and November 2006, said that "The first time we went over there [to Iraq], we were in sort of a rush, so there wasn't a whole lot of training to be done, we just went and qualified on all of our weapons". He went on to state that the enemy "knew they couldn't take us head-on so they were going to use IED's and snipers and that sort of thing so we became more concerned with what you call 'force protection' where everything had to be a lot more hardened and secured".[119] This penchant for force protection has become characteristic of most modern Western militaries.[120] In Iraq, the US military isolated itself from the population by living in fortified camps.[121] In COIN operations, the soldiers must maintain a presence in order to make the population feel secure. This entails risk but, as the 2006 COIN FM states, "Combat requires commanders to be prepared to take some risk, especially at the tactical level".[122]

Another allegation aimed at the US military has been its excessive use of force, where in COIN operations, the less force that is used the better. Especially in Iraq, US forces have been accused of being 'trigger happy' and intent on destroying the insurgents at the cost of protecting the local population. The second-most senior officer in Iraq for training local security forces, Brigadier General Nigel Aylwin-Foster, has said that US forces were "too inclined to consider offensive operations and destruction of the insurgent as key to a given situation".[123] A US Soldier, Sgt.

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Camilo Mejía who served in Iraq for six months beginning in April 2003, said that “The frustration that resulted from our inability to get back at those who were attacking us led to tactics that seemed designed simply to punish the local population that was supporting them”. Many others have talked of the heavy-handed and disrespectful tactics employed by US forces in Iraq, including at checkpoints, and during convoys, raids and arrests.[124] In Afghanistan also, heavy use of fire was used in the direct vicinity of civilians. For example, an estimated 117 Afghan civilians (including 61 children and 26 women) were killed in one incident in a village in Farah province on 4 May 2009.[125] From US military documents released by *Wikileaks*, it is evident that US forces called in two sorties of 1000lb precision guided bombs from US B-1 bombers after the Taliban had engaged them in heavy fighting amongst the villagers.[126] The failure of some US military personnel to distinguish between enemy and friendly forces was also a source of conflict in the coalition. Within the first two weeks of the war, five British service personnel were killed as a result of friendly fire from US forces, which was more than had died in combat with Iraqi forces at the time.[127]

One must remember however, that it was the responsibility of military commanders and policy-makers to ensure that US forces were properly trained and equipped for their mission and properly briefed on their professional expectations. As Thomas E. Ricks has pointed out, “There is no question that the vast majority of the soldiers in the field had poured their hearts and souls into the effort. Yet they frequently were led by poor commanders”.[128] Perhaps the most dramatic embodiment of this failure of leadership was the Abu Ghraib scandal. By late autumn 2003, Abu Ghraib, which had stood as a symbol of the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, contained some 10,000 prisoners. What’s more, most of these were innocent Iraqis and 90% are estimated to have been of little or no intelligence value.[129] Inmates were subject to systematic torture such as beatings, the pouring of hot phosphoric liquid on to their bodies, forced masturbation and other simulated sex acts, sodomizing detainees with a chemical light and a broom stick, and the use of military dogs to scare and sometimes bite detainees. In a 53-page report, Major General Antonio M. Taguba found that Army intelligence and CIA officers were actively encouraging the use of torture in order to obtain intelligence, and that the soldiers were “poorly prepared and untrained...prior to deployment, at the mobilization site, upon arrival in theater, and throughout the mission”.[130] Ricks has argued that “It wasn’t that soldiers were ordered to be cruel”, but that “acts of cruelty were tolerated in some units”.[131] Although one could argue that it is the responsibility of all soldiers to not engage in such barbaric and damaging acts, there was an evident lack of leadership and training which meant that not only were these soldiers placed in this situation because of poor leadership, but poor training also ensured that they were not equipped to deal with the situation when it arose. Alastair Finlan has laid the blame at the feet of President Bush, arguing that by ordering the United States military to defeat global terrorism, he was “giving them an asymmetric task that they were not culturally, ideationally or materially equipped for”.[132] Fred Kaplan has further argued that one of the reasons why the military failed to adapt to a COIN strategy was that the Bush administration consistently failed to acknowledge the presence of an insurgency.[133]

## *Exceptionalism as a Cause of Indiscipline?*

As with the previous discussion on leadership and military culture, the elements of exceptionalism that will be discussed in this section (“exemptionalism”, moral absolutism, and missionary purpose) overlap to a large degree. “American exemptionalism” was termed by Michael Ignatieff, and referred to by Harold Hongju Koh, who said it was the “ways in which the United States actually exempts itself from certain international law rules and agreements, even ones that it may have played a critical role in framing”.[134] Peter J. Spiro calls it “New Sovereignism” and says that it means the US “can pick and choose the international conventions and laws that serve its purpose and reject those that do not”.[135] In the first few months of the Bush administration, Bush and his neoconservatives had already began moving away from multilateralism towards a policy of unilateral exemption.[136] As discussed in chapter 3, the 2002 NSS announced that it did not recognise the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) over Americans, and thus refused it the power to enforce the Geneva Conventions and Protocols on US military personnel. According to Human Rights Watch, this flouting of international human rights law was a direct cause of the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and at prisons in Afghanistan.[137] Others agree with this conclusion. For example, this approach to human rights law, according to Robert G. Patman, “sits uncomfortably with the notion of due process in an international context and has contributed to a culture of impunity in the prosecution of the war on terror”.[138] There is plenty of evidence that there was a culture of impunity. For one example, Specialist Patrick Resta, a National Guardsman who served in a small prison camp in Jalula, Iraq, was told by his supervisor that “The

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Geneva Conventions don't exist at all in Iraq, and that's in writing if you want to see it.”[139]

Moral absolutism is one of the most noticeable discursive elements of American exceptionalism, and tended to especially characterise the lead up to the GWOT. One of the worst decisions in the entire war was to disband the Ba'ath Party and the Iraqi Army after they were defeated. Donald Rumsfeld has since said that 'de-Baathification' was "akin to the Allies' de-Nazification policy in Germany after World War II", while the disbanding of most of the 400,000 strong Iraqi Army was not a decision "that stuck out at the time".[140] Toby Dodge has argued that the Bush administration understood the Baath party and Sunni community through a "diabolical enemy image schema",[141] and as a result, felt obliged to 'de-Baathify'.[142] The effect on Iraqi society was hugely destructive. In total, it has been estimated that Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Order Number 1 (de-Baathification) and CPA Order Number 2 (disbanding of the army) put around 300,000 Iraqis out of a job, 250,000 of which had weapons and access to ammunition.[143] The decisions were in direct opposition to the plans of the British, who were under the impression from intelligence reports that many Iraqi commanders would defect soon after the invasion.[144] The biggest critics of the US conduct of the Iraq war were British soldiers. Brigadier General Ailwyn-Foster was perhaps the biggest. In an influential essay in *Military Review*, Ailwyn-Foster criticised the way the US forces thought that the "only effective, and morally acceptable, COIN strategy was to kill or capture all terrorists and insurgents".[145] Bearing in mind the way that terrorists were portrayed as evil in the previous chapters, it is possible to see how moral absolutism may have affected US COIN. What's more, Ailwyn-Foster said that US military personnel had a "strong sense of moral authority" and a "sense of moral righteousness" which made them "fervently believe in the mission's underlying purpose, the delivery of democracy to Iraq", and which sometimes resulted in a distortion of "collective military judgement".[146] In all fairness, one cannot generalise about these sorts of things across the whole, or even the majority of the US military. For instance, US soldier Chris Miller has said that "Of course, we all have different opinions about why we're there, whether we should be there, but we all just went out there and just did the job".[147]

Finally, missionary purpose is perhaps the element of American exceptionalism which had the biggest effect on US military conduct. Consisting of American values of freedom, democracy and morality, this is the belief in the universalism of American values and has been associated with paternalism, cultural insensitivity, and in extreme cases, racism. The argument of Michael H. Hunt will be very helpful to consider here:

"U.S. foreign-policy ideology has also proven disabling by cutting Americans off from an understanding of, not to mention sympathy for, cultures distant from our own. The sense of national superiority central to that ideology has given rise to stereotypes that diminish other people by exaggerating the seemingly negative aspects of their lives and by constricting the perceived range of their skills, accomplishments, and emotions. By denigrating other cultures as backward or malleable, these stereotypes raise in Americans false expectations that it is an easy enterprise to induce and direct political change and economic development. On encountering obstinacy or resistance, Americans understandably feel frustrated and resentful and in extremity may indulge dehumanizing stereotypes that make possible the resort to forms of coercion or violence otherwise unthinkable. This pattern, first fully apparent in relations with blacks and native Americans, continues to govern American dealings with "Third World" peoples".[148]

This passage eloquently and fairly, sums up a negative aspect of American exceptionalism which may be expressed by US military personnel in conflict zones where there is at least in part, a professed aim to help a group of indigenous people. For example, this is the account of Specialist Jeff Engelhart, who served in Baquba, Iraq:

"I guess while I was there, the general attitude was, A dead Iraqi is just another dead Iraqi... You know, so what?... The soldiers honestly thought we were trying to help the people and they were mad because it was almost like a betrayal. Like here we are trying to help you, here I am, you know, thousands of miles away from home and my family, and I have to be here for a year and work every day on these missions. Well, we're trying to help you and you just turn around and try to kill us."[149]

By thinking that he was going there to help Iraqis, Specialist Engelhart and his fellow soldiers became frustrated when insurgents (who would generally blend in very well with the local population) would try and resist the occupation, thus resorting to an attitude that diminished the value of Iraqi lives.

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It was all too easy to move on from this stage to engage in racist attitudes which, in a COIN operation, is extremely damaging to the success of the mission. Interestingly, Brigadier General Ailwyn-Foster has also said of the US forces, “at times their cultural insensitivity, almost certainly inadvertent, arguably amounted to institutional racism”.[150] Other primary accounts from US forces in Iraq seem to lend legitimacy to this seemingly blunt charge. A Specialist Middleton said that “a lot of guys really supported that whole concept that, you know, if they don’t speak English and they have darker skin, they’re not as human as us, so we can do what we want”. Specialist Engelhart has spoken out about how Iraqis were “dehumanized”, and how “it was very common for United States soldiers to call them derogatory terms, like camel jockeys or Jihad Johnny or, you know, sand nigger”. Also, a Sergeant Millard spoke of the “racialised hatred towards Iraqis”, which, according to Specialist Harmon, meant that soldiers had the attitude that “they’re not people anymore. They’re just objects”.[151] Chris Miller said that “Some guys went out there and had pretty racist attitudes towards the people, mishandled them, sure...But I don’t think it was quite as bad as people picture it, especially people who weren’t actually there”.[152]

There may be another argument that might help explain the clear prevalence of racism in Iraq and Afghanistan amongst US military personnel. There has been a sharp increase in the number of convicted criminals (including neo-Nazis) that have joined the US military since the GWOT began. According to Matt Kennard, who wrote a book called *Irregular Army: How The US Military Recruited Neo-Nazis, Gang Members, And Criminals To Fight The War On Terror*, the number of convicted criminals that were enlisted between 2004 and 2006 doubled to 4,230 –including those convicted of rape and murder –and 43,977 more had been found guilty of a serious misdemeanour, including assault.[153] This is what Brig. Gen. Ailwyn-Foster has called the “de-professionalisation” of the Army, characterised by the phenomenon of the “exodus of the captains” in the mid-90’s.[154]

## CONCLUSION

The values and beliefs discussed in the first chapter have originated from legitimate historic events and processes that are exceptional to the United States. In this sense, American exceptionalism is an admirable and somewhat benevolent form of nationalism. However, what this chapter has shown is that these values and beliefs have been utilised in order to justify a foreign policy ideology which defines America’s role as a saviour of civilization. Because America perceives itself as the first nation to emerge unshackled from previous European power structures, the narrative of freedom resonates deeply with Americans, which in turn makes it easier to create a narrative of slavery and oppression abroad. Equally, Americans believe deeply in the superiority of their own democratic system, which has given legitimacy to claims that it acts only with benevolent intentions through its developmental foreign policy agendas. Finally, the religious and moralistic nature of American political discourse has meant that conflicts tend to be perceived as battles between good and evil, while America’s unique cultural and religious history has determined that foreign policy is injected with the myth of America’s destiny as the redeemer of humankind. American exceptionalism has historically been problematic for the conduct of sound American foreign policy and strategy.

The second and third chapters have shown that the neoconservative agenda was one of militant imperialism, which stressed emphatically the need for American military preponderance and adventurism. The heroes of the neoconservatives such as Winston Churchill, Harry Truman, and Ronald Reagan were in a completely different strategic environment to the one which America was in at the start of the twenty-first century. America wasn’t under threat from radical nationalism or communist imperialism, and instead, the Bush administration created a threat that was bigger than it actually was. Ultimately, this would become a self-fulfilling prophecy as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq would come to show. What’s more, the ‘Bush Doctrine’ further alienated itself by showing a complete disregard for international institutions, and a claim to benevolence which was incredibly hypocritical. In order to justify this strategy, Bush and his speechwriters masterfully relied on a discourse of exceptionalism which is deeply embedded in American culture and in the American psyche. All the same elements were there: moral absolutism; a threatening other; and a divine missionary responsibility to civilize the world and spread freedom and democracy. The only difference was what lay behind it: imperial ambition.

The final chapter has argued three things. First, military discipline is extremely important for the successful conduct of military operations, especially COIN; it is important morally, legally, strategically, and tactically. Second, the US military was badly let down by the politicians and its leadership. They were neither culturally, nor strategically

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prepared for COIN warfare, let alone two such wars concurrently. Furthermore, poor leadership and poor tactics exacerbated an increasingly hostile insurgency. Finally, American exceptionalism did have a negative effect on the conduct of US forces, and does help explain some difficulties. Primarily, moral absolutism had an indirect effect by informing the decision for de-Baathification and the disbanding of the Iraqi army, which arguably created the insurgency in the first place. Also, "exemptionalism" did have an effect by increasing the level of systemic impunity and delegitimising the capacity of the US forces to protect the civilian population. Furthermore, missionary exceptionalism is implicitly condescending and paternalistic, and when the insurgency began, it had the effect of increasing frustration, dehumanization, and racism.

This research has shown that the utility of discursive American exceptionalism is in its power to unify, to give purpose to, and to exemplify the exceptionally patriotic essence of the American people. This utility does come with two negatives which constitute a disutility however. First, the sheer power of this discourse can be used dangerously to justify militant imperialism when you combine it with the sheer size and capability of the US military. Secondly, as this research has demonstrated, this discourse can have serious negative implications for the conduct of the US military when it applies this force abroad. Although other factors may or may not have been predominant in the conduct of US forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is a relationship between American exceptionalism and the way that some US soldiers conduct themselves when in a war-zone.

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[70] Hodgson, G., *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009), p. 10.

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[71] Vaïse, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

[72] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[73] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[74] Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

[75] Patman has called it an “exclusive concept of US exceptionalism”, see Patman, *op. cit.*, pp. 971-972; Vaïse has argued that the new age of neoconservatism was born in 1995, see Vaïse, *op. cit.*, p. 11; Stanley Hoffmann has said that the new exceptionalism is “based almost exclusively on military domination”, see Hoffmann, S., *Chaos and Violence: What Globalization, Failed States, and Terrorism Mean for U.S. Foreign Policy* (Plymouth, Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 118; and Hodgson has remarked how the US has drifted in the direction of a new and dangerous mood of international exceptionalism”, see Hodgson, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

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[85] *Ibid.*

[86] The axis powers were a formal military alliance, no such alliance existed between Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. In fact, North Korea is famed for its isolation from the rest of the world, and Iran and Iraq fought each other in one of the most deadly conflicts of the twentieth century. See Callinicos, A. T., *The New Mandarins of American Power* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2003), p. 14.

[87] The US facilitated Iraq’s use of chemical weapons against the Iranians by providing Saddam with satellite images; Reagan allowed Iraq to import biological materials such as anthrax, West Nile virus, and botulinal toxin; and Bush’s father George H.W. Bush declared ‘normal relations’ with Baghdad about a year after Saddam Hussein gassed the Kurds. See Mearsheimer, J. J., and Walt, S. J., ‘An Unnecessary War’, in Sifry, M.L., and Cerf, C., (eds.), *The Iraq War Reader* (New York, Touchstone, 2003), pp. 419-20, cited in Callinicos, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.

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[88] President Bush, *State of the Union*, *op. cit.*

[89] Foley, M., *American Credo: The Place of Ideas in US Politics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 22.

[90] Finlan, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

[91] President Bush, *Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point* (1 June 2002). Available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html> [Accessed 28 February 2014].

[92] *Ibid.*

[93] As discussed in the previous chapter, Bush was informed in January 2004 that there were no WMD in Iraq, only to doubt this information and order another inspection. He was told officially and categorically that there were no WMD about a month after giving this speech, so is likely to have at least been sceptical about their presence by this point. Also, the link between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein was widely perceived as untrue around this time. See Kaplan, F., *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power* (Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons, 2008), pp. 160-161.

[94] President Bush, *Address to the Republican National Convention* (2 September 2004), cited in The White House Archives, *Selected Speeches of George W Bush: 2001-2008*, pp. 257-271. Available at [http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected\\_Speeches\\_George\\_W\\_Bush.pdf](http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf) [Accessed 23 February 2014].

[95] *Ibid.*

[96] *Ibid.*

[97] *Ibid.*

[98] Foley, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

[99] Hoffmann, S., *Chaos and Violence: What Globalization, Failed States, and Terrorism Mean for U.S. Foreign Policy* (Plymouth, Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 123-124.

[100] *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (September 2002), pp. iv-vii. Available at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf> [Accessed 22 January 2014].

[101] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[102] Michael Walzer has argued that “The line between legitimate and illegitimate first strikes is not going to be drawn at the point of imminent attack but at the point of sufficient threat”. By sufficient threat, Walzer clarifies that there must be present “a manifest intent to injure, a degree of active preparation that makes that intent a positive danger, and a general situation in which waiting, or doing anything other than fighting, greatly magnifies the risk”. See Walzer, M., *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York, Basic Books, 1977), p. 81.

[103] *NSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

[104] *Ibid.*

[105] Ricks, T. E., *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (London, Penguin Books, 2007), p. 38.



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[106] Fukuyama, F., *After the Neocons* (London, Profile Books, 2006), p. 101.

[107] NSS, *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 21.

[108] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

[109] *The International Criminal Court*, 'About the Court'. Available at [http://www.icc-cpi.int/en\\_menus/icc/about%20the%20court/Pages/about%20the%20court.aspx](http://www.icc-cpi.int/en_menus/icc/about%20the%20court/Pages/about%20the%20court.aspx) [Accessed 23 March 2014].

[110] Sidgwick, H., *The Elements of Politics* (London, Macmillan, 1897), p. 254, cited in Walzer, M., *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York, Basic Books, 1977), p. 129.

[111] International Committee of the Red Cross, *War and International Humanitarian Law* (2010 Overview), available at <http://www.icrc.org/eng/war-and-law/overview-war-and-law.htm> [Accessed 21 January 2014].

[112] Walzer, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

[113] Headquarters Department of the US Army (Foreword by Petraeus, D. H., and Amos, J. F.), *Counterinsurgency Field Manual: US Army Field Manual 3-24; Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5* (2006). Available online at <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf> [Accessed 26 November 2013].

[114] Sidgwick, *op. cit.*, p. 264, cited in Walzer, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

[115] Booth, K., *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (New York, Holmes & Meier, 1979), p. 106.

[116] *Ibid.*

[117] For example, Fred Kaplan has pointed out that the 2006 COIN Field Manual (*op. cit.*), which was the Army's "first in decades", was in fact a "scathing critique of the administration's entire conduct of the war", see Kaplan, F., *Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power* (Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons, 2008), p. 183; See also Finlan, A., *Contemporary Military Culture and Strategic Studies: US and UK Armed Forces in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013), p. 129; and Ricks, T. E., *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (London, Penguin Books, 2007), p. 253.

[118] Former British Lieutenant-Colonel Tim Collins, 'Iraq War Analysis', *The Guardian* (online), 14 April 2009. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2009/apr/10/iraq-war-tim-collins> [Accessed 22 February 2014].

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[120] See Shaw, M. *The New Western Way of War: Risk-Transfer War and its Crisis in Iraq* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 2005).

[121] DOD, Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) 2006, vers. 3.1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 23 May 2005, cited in Brig. Nigel Aylwin Foster, 'Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations', *Military Review* (Nov-Dec, 2005), p. 6.

[122] COIN FM (2006), *op. cit.*, p. 7-3.

[123] Aylwin-Foster, Brig. N., *op. cit.*, p. 4.

[124] Hedges, C., and Al-Arian, L., 'The carnage, the blown-up bodies I saw... Why? What was this for?', *The Guardian* (online). 13 July 2007. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jul/13/usa.iraq> [Accessed 26

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[127] The Guardian, 'Wounded British soldiers condemn US 'cowboy' pilot', 31 March 2003 (Online), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/31/iraq5>

[128] Ricks, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

[129] *Ibid.*, p. 238.

[130] Hersh, S., 'Torture at Abu Ghraib', *The New Yorker* (online), 10 May 2004, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/10/040510fa\\_fact?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/10/040510fa_fact?currentPage=all) [Accessed 10 April 2014]

[131] Ricks, *op. cit.* p. 272.

[132] Finlan, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

[133] Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 162. What's more, Ricks has drawn attention to the fact that in the spring and summer of 2003, General Franks, head of Central Command (CENTCOM) –the US military's highest military post –was "estranged" from the Pentagon's civilian leaders. See Ricks, *op. cit.* p. 155; and Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

[134] Koh, H. H., 'On American Exceptionalism', *Stanford Law Review*, 55:5 (2003), pp. 1482-1483.

[135] Spiro, P. J., 'The New Sovereignists: American Exceptionalism and Its False Prophets', *Foreign Affairs*, 79:6 (2000), p. 9.

[136] Kaplan, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

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[139] Hedges and Al-Arian, *op. cit.*

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[142] Dodge said that "The de-Ba'athification was an attempt to drive what was left of the old governing elites, their technocratic allies and the Sunni community out of state institutions – a direct result of the way Iraq was ideationally ordered from within the American decision-makers' belief system". *Ibid.*, p. 473.

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[148] Hunt, M. H., *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987), p. 176.

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[154] Brig. Gen. Ailwyn-Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

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