

**American Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy. Hilde Restad, *American Exceptionalism: An Idea That Made a Nation and Remade the World* (London: Routledge, 2015) (270 + xiii)**

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One of the intriguing stories of the last four centuries' history has been that of the settlers who arrived from Europe, but mainly England, and established colonies in North America, which they called the New World. Already on arrival, they brought with them the idea of being God's chosen people based upon the Biblical Jews, therefore, they saw themselves as an exceptional community. With time this thought only strengthened and when the thirteen colonies successfully fought for their independence from Great Britain, the American nation took this idea as a building block in its own historical destiny. The next more than two centuries brought success upon success, so the citizens of the United States found a national credo, a mystical but enforcing intellectual force that can be hardly understood on a rational basis and which is even today is shared by a large majority of Americans. In the past four decades the historical literature has delved into the roots and meaning of this phenomenon.

The rich literature on American exceptionalism has recently produced another volume. Hilde Restad examines the phenomenon in American foreign policy, and this fact makes it somewhat different from other books dealing with the same topic.<sup>1</sup> Restad posits that there are three pillars of American exceptionalism: difference from Europe, the unique role in history, and the exemption from the laws of history. Her thesis is the following: American exceptionalism is not only a useful tool in describing American identity, but one of the most important forces behind a "unilateral internationalist foreign policy," that has been constant throughout the history of the United States. (3) Therefore, the author wishes to show that America as a country, from the very beginning, has always tried to get ahead in the international arena by playing according to its own set of rules and interests—whether trade, economic, political, or military steps were concerned. Restad wants to prove that the long-standing picture is false that the U.S. foreign policy—partly on account of the two different interpretations of American exceptionalism, namely example

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<sup>1</sup> Hilde Restad is Associate Professor of International Studies at Bjorknes University College in Oslo, Norway. Her doctoral thesis was on American exceptionalism as an identity and its effect on historic U.S. foreign policy traditions. She frequently comments on American politics in the Norwegian media.

and intervention—has been cyclical in the sense that once it showed isolationist motives, while other times internationalist intentions came out on top. She feels that not only do these ideas give way to oversimplification, but they also produce an insoluble tension on further examination, therefore, they are not useful for relevant analysis. Thereby Restad questions the classical point of view concerning the traditional description of the history of American foreign policy. The most acute questions that she assails are the following: are there indeed two strains inherent in American exceptionalism (example and intervention), or is there only one side to this notion? Is American foreign policy cyclical and periodical, or is it constantly wedded to the basic interests stemming from the American exceptionalist thesis? And, based upon the first two questions, did the twentieth century really bring a new characteristic to U.S. foreign policy, or did it already during in the eighteenth and nineteenth century show the signs of “unilateralist internationalism?” These are intriguing questions to historians and political theorists alike, and the quest for the answers makes the book an important reading.

Restad gives a detailed argument why, in her analysis, there are no two different interpretations of American exceptionalism, thereby she finds fault with a large segment of the popular and widespread literature that states that there are the exemplary vein and the missionary vein. According to this, in the first period of American history the first dominated, while from the Spanish-American War the latter has been decisive in American foreign policy. She does not deny the possibility of the dichotomy of the exceptionalist view, but she argues that when it comes to U.S. foreign policy, all along the desire to reform the world has been the constant force. She highlights three elements in American exceptionalism: religious, secular, and political aspects. These three fundamentals give the basis for American identity: the American is an exceptional nation. This notion is reflected in the history of the U.S. foreign policy.

The third chapter gives a thorough analysis of the traditional understanding of U.S. foreign policy and the errors therein, and Restad contrasts these with her own interpretation. The traditional school’s major hypothesis is, which lately has undergone some correction, that the United States for a long time after its birth conducted an isolationist foreign policy, which only changed around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the country entered the international arena for good. Restad finds fault with this explanation and argues that the United States has always practiced an active foreign policy, which she calls “unilateral internationalism,” which is, and that is the really important feature of her thesis, strongly connected to the idea of American exceptionalism. As is well known, the isolationist-neutralist paradigm is derived from Washington’s Farewell Address, Jefferson’s First Inaugural, and the Monroe Doctrine. As Restad points

out, it is valid only from a great power point of view. The United States at this stage did not have the military potential to compete with the traditional European powers, and the physical distance also would have made any such undertaking impossible. However, if one looks at trade, the story is very different. In this realm the United States has been very active from day one. The United States wanted to become a trading power first, and only then did it think of expansion—a very understandable logic on America's part. The expansion on the North American continent should not be viewed as domestic policy, because the continental territory quadrupled after the Paris Peace Treaty of 1783. Accordingly, what George Washington expressed was much more in line with realizing the country's interests rather than isolation from the world. As Restad puts it, "what we can take away from the Farewell Address, rather than isolationism, is unilateralism." (71) This line of thinking was further strengthened by Jefferson, who during the War of Independence was talking about an "Empire of Liberty," a concept that in his presidential years became "Empire for Liberty." And the famed Monroe doctrine of 1823 also wished to safeguard free room for Americans for maneuvering in Latin America. That is why Restad claims that by 1824 "the American empire was already in existence." (76) In this reading the Spanish-American War in 1898 did not represent a break in an otherwise continuous foreign policy practice, it only highlighted further expansion. For this reason, the isolationist interpretation for nineteenth-century American foreign policy, which is still holding a strong position, is, in Restad's view, "wholly incorrect." (82)

The fourth chapter is the longest part of the book, which deals with the position and behavior of the United States in the international arena after World War I and World War II, respectively. Restad introduces the major components of both the realist and neorealist interpretations, and she criticizes them as well for lack of certain aspects from their conclusions. And this missing piece is the cornerstone of the historical constant national identity: American exceptionalism. Without this, argues the author, American foreign policy cannot be soundly analyzed, and if one does not take this into account one will arrive at false conclusions, especially what regards the twentieth century. The basic nature of American foreign policy did not change in the interwar years: all throughout it aimed at securing American interests to the maximum possible extent. The difference between 1919 and 1945 was that after World War II the American leadership was able to put American interest in a multilateral-looking world, and that is exactly the reason why it created such a world order.

Arguably the next two chapters are the most interesting part of the book, at least these provide the case studies to prove Restad's point above. She wishes to demonstrate with the two World Wars and their outcomes concerning American

foreign policy that there was no isolationism but instead an unbroken chain of unilateralist internationalism loomed in the background, which to a large extent sprang from American exceptionalism as one of the basic building blocks of American identity. The basic pillar of the Versailles Peace Treaty was the League of Nations, which was based on the idea of international cooperation. But while Wilson thought this could be done with American leadership, Henry Cabot Lodge refused to accept that assumption. He rather wanted to see freedom of choice in American foreign policy and that is the reason why he opposed the League, but not as an organization that was under American control and, consequently, would have given the United States a free hand. It was not the country that was isolationist but the political elite that had been brought up on American exceptionalism: and these people could not agree as to what path to pursue on the international stage. As Restad states, “the unilateral internationalism of Henry Cabot Lodge fought against the multilateral internationalism of Woodrow Wilson.” (133) Also, the whole decade of the 1920s was far from as isolationist as can be read in most books. The United States played an active role in the reconstruction of Europe, whether financial, economic, or political aspects are viewed— and thanks to the omnipotent American capital, Europeans many times heeded American wishes and expectations. The 1930s meant only a relative decline in this trend and not further isolationism, although it is beyond dispute that due to the Great Depression the domestic scene far outweighed the international drama. And of course, to speak of isolationism in the interwar years concerning Latin America or Asia would be denying the facts. Isolationism as such was a Eurocentric interpretation only.

The argument is similar about World War II but one level higher: Pearl Harbor was not the cause but the catalyst of U.S. entry into the war; the new world order created by the United States dovetailed with American exceptionalism and unilateralism; and, therefore, the continuity of American foreign policy dominates as opposed to the opinions that hold that internationalism appeared only at this time in U.S. foreign conduct. American public opinion already before Pearl Harbor leaned toward entering the war according to contemporary measuring, and Franklin Roosevelt, with the Atlantic Charter in August 1941, had started to put the postwar order in place, also prior to the Japanese attack. The United States thus created a multilateral world for itself in sharp contrast to joining one, an immense difference. In this reading, and this is the pivotal point of Restad’s argument, the world order after World War II was not a resuscitation of the Wilsonian idea, but rather achieving the Lodgean internationalism. Most issues in the Charter of the United Nations were to protect American independence from possible international restraint. Most of what Lodge had objected to a generation earlier now found its way to the new charter thereby ensuring American independence on

the international scene. It is worth mentioning that the Soviet Union accepted the crucial veto power of the five permanent members of the Security Council—they wanted, and secured, a free hand as well.

The next stop is the post-Cold War world, which in Restad's argument did not bring any perceptible change regarding U.S. foreign policy. The author demonstrates that the foreign policy of the George H. W. Bush-Bill Clinton-George W. Bush trio all served the same goal: to protect American leadership in the world. Although on the level of rhetoric there were differences, the unilateral internationalism can well be shown. And according to Restad, American exceptionalism played a big part in this. A good example of preserving American interests over the interest of the international community is that at the time of the first Iraq War Congress gave approval for military action by a much closer margin than in 2002. Naturally, the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq was not nearly as serious a national security threat as the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in 2001 resulting in the death of almost three thousand Americans. One of the sad side effects of the "War on Terror" is its negative practice on human rights. Restad proves, however, that even in this field there has been continuity that dates back to the start of the Cold War. The upshot is, again, that there is no radical change but permanence in U.S. foreign policy. If there was novelty, that was the younger Bush's rhetoric: "American exceptionalism and unilateral internationalism was laid bare by the Bush administration's lack of diplomatic gloss." (216)

In the closing chapter the author paints the picture of American exceptionalism today, and she argues that with the appearance of Barack Obama and his interpretation the death toll of American exceptionalism has been sounded. The long and unsuccessful military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, together with the economic recession in 2008, altogether produce symptoms similar to the mid-1970s. Its effect on domestic policy was that Obama, partly in order to boost his reelection chances, became the most fervent proponent of American exceptionalism in recent memory. Restad's book is important because it gives a new interpretation regarding U.S. foreign policy based on clear reasoning. The feeling of exceptionalism is a major historical component of the collective American psyche that has left its mark on all of the fields of American life throughout the centuries. Therefore, it is not shocking that this was the case in foreign policy as well—but thanks to Restad, now we understand that this aspect has been more crucial than earlier thought. It is safe to say that the United States will in the future follow the same path in the world: it will always pursue a free-hand approach, even if there may be a thin veneer of multilateral tinge to it. There can only be change in this manner if the United States loses its immense influence on the world, but that seems to be in the distant future.