

The American Duality: Exceptionalism or Exemptionalism?

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Conventional Wisdom	5
Real World Observation	7
Methodology	9
Ethnocentrism	10
Theoretical Paradigm: Offensive Realism	15
Case Study: Kony 2012	17
Case Study: Biological Weapons Convention	20
Implications	23
Works Cited	27

Introduction

Growing up as an American citizen with little knowledge of or influence from the rest of the world can have a dramatic impact on one's perception of their place within society. The United States has become more of a melting pot as its distinct cultures have faded away over the years and supposedly, being an American has become a coveted characteristic. I have come across the idea of American exceptionalism through my coursework and have always been curious as to how one country has been able to accomplish so much in a relatively short period of time. I understood this sense of exceptional meant we thought Americans and the United States as a whole were simply better than the rest. The term ethnocentric was an exact parallel to this concept, in which one group views its members and ways of doing things as superior to others. It wasn't until my junior year when I had taken on my minor of global politics that I able to link the ethnocentric qualities possessed by Americans with how this was interpreted by the rest of the world. When I took an intercultural communication and an international law class concurrently, the connection was made obvious and became something I knew would be interesting to problematize.

Through my coursework in political science the idea of ethnocentrism has resonated especially within foreign policy. The United States' inflated sense of eminence has allowed their unilateral rule to impose ideologies on to other states, to intervene when deemed necessary (often disregarding any considerations of state sovereignty) and to be exempt from certain laws and sanctions which govern the international world. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a noteworthy scholar-senator, once said, "The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself."¹ Culture plays a critical role in shaping politics, and is often reflected in

governmental structure (German sociologist Max Weber theorized the Protestant work ethic framed the origins of capitalism). However, I have discovered a puzzling contradiction: most cultures have endured the failures of several political regimes and although these cultures have most certainly changed over time, I rarely see the significance of culture addressed in political science literature. A brief history may be mentioned, but in terms of enacting foreign policy, the impact on a culture is rarely considered an issue. Thus, I believe that my ethnorelativist position, developed as a result of my encounters with theories and concepts of intercultural communication, has given me a unique perspective on such matters. I have therefore come to question some of our country's actions, looking beyond the political and economic consequences to consider social and cultural implications as well.

The purpose of this paper is to fuse ideas from both my communication studies and political science coursework in order to explore the concepts of American exceptionalism and ethnocentrism as it applies to U.S. foreign policy. I think this topic is immensely important and relevant as I personally believe a significant number of people today are ignorant and unaware of the political, economic, social and military developments occurring not only domestically, but internationally as well. Although I am no expert, I have slowly become more interested in current events over the past year. Many of my friends can name every *Real Housewife* (sadly, I can too), but they remain unaware of GOP candidates, of plans for a military base in Australia, and of protests erupting in Russia. I, in no way, want to criticize others for being uninformed, because I used to be the same way and did not care about any news which had no real impact on me. However, I think it is extremely important for individuals to recognize the world is bigger than their singular existence. As students and citizens of a democracy, we are privileged to be able to voice our opinions and challenge authority, including our own government; I think it is

imperative, then, to take advantage of this liberty, which can only be accomplished if one is aware of what is happening globally. With the combination of my communication studies and political science education, I understand, in a deepened way, how crucial it is to interpret the realities and current events of the world through an ethnorelativist lens while simultaneously challenging the conventional wisdom to ensure the status quo does not define the perspective of the masses.

Conventional Wisdom

Americans believe that their country is different from others primarily because of its triumphant and enduring emergence from a revolution and its individualism. Alexis de Tocqueville coined the term “American exceptionalism” when he stated: “The position of Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no other democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one.”² According to a *Gallup poll* in December of 2010: “Americans widely agree that the United States has a unique character because of its history and Constitution that sets it apart from other nations as the greatest in the world. This view, commonly referred to as ‘U.S. exceptionalism,’ is shared by at least 73% of Americans in all party groups...” Further research indicates that 66% of these American’s believe that because of its status it is has “a special responsibility to be the leading nation in world affairs.”³ *The Pew Research Center* released a report in May of 2011 which stated that 53% of Americans say the United States is one of the greatest countries in the world along with some others and 38% believed the U.S. stands above all other countries.⁴ Upon closer inspection, this conventional wisdom is misleading.

The prosperity America has experienced is what sets the country's personal sense of "exceptionalism" apart from any other nation's common feeling of pride and nationalism. Not only does this condition summon a sense of superiority, but it "is based upon a number of core realities including American military primacy, economic dynamism and political diversity."⁵ However, the impression of exaggerated eminence borders on being ethnocentric; in turn this authorizes noncompliant behaviors masked as altruism, such as: preemptive war to protect the country; flagrant indifference to established regulations; and the reinterpretation of international treaties. As if to illustrate, in July 2006, a *World Public Opinion* poll found that 76% of people agreed that the U.S. is playing the role of world policeman more than it should be.⁶ Although this conduct has gone unchecked, it has been under scrupulous examination by both the international community and domestic foreign policy experts. Indeed, according to David Forsythe, "U.S. unilateral disregard for many international principles, laws, standards and views was so notable that a conservative author and former official of the Reagan Administration saw the United States...as a 'rogue nation.'"⁷ The United States' ostensible power is not called into question because of the very adverse reactions associated with that power, especially militarily.

Although Americans have a sense of patriotism, as do many other nations, these citizens are either oblivious or uncritical of the government's translation of power into foreign policy.

An exceptional-exemptional duality has consequently become present within the United States:

Americans were always a contradictory people: godly and dangerous, peaceful and warlike, deeply convinced that their republican constitution, dedicated to the sovereignty of the people and the rule of law, was the 'last best hope of earth,' and yet contemptuous of foreigners and quick to seize whatever they wanted.⁸

The conventional wisdom is misleading primarily because it fails to expand upon the negative aspects of this American hubris and the potential consequences it faces in the future. The

international community can appreciate national pride, but the chauvinistic propensities in foreign policy demonstrated by the United States are ephemeral and will be called into question.

Real World Observation

On September 23, 2011, Republican Presidential candidate Ron Paul spoke to a group of undergraduates at Louisiana State University about the idea of American exceptionalism. He notes, “America’s exceptionalism is rooted in its founding documents, and to the degree that we betray the Founding Fathers vision we also betray our nation’s unique promise.” He goes on to say the nation could be exceptional once again.⁹ Throughout the 2012 presidential campaign, several candidates bolster the idea of this great responsibility bestowed upon the United States by focusing on “the idea that the United States is inherently superior to the world’s other nations [and] has become the battle cry from a new front in the ongoing culture wars.”¹⁰ This emphasis on superiority attests to the United States’ idiosyncrasies found within foreign policy which “presume that America’s values, political system, and history are unique and worthy of universal admiration. They also imply that the United States is both destined and entitled to play a distinct and positive role on the world stage.”¹¹ Prevalent attributes to this unilateral rule include imposing ideologies on to other states, intervening when deemed necessary and to be exempt from certain laws and sanctions which govern the international world. There seems to be a fine line, then, between American exceptionalism and America as a State that then becomes exempt from playing by the rules.

To be sure, the United States has a track record of disregarding policies that it has helped to establish. Questionable actions are justified by doing what is in the best interest of other nations, but simultaneously contributes to its sustained opulence. Previous, and often unchecked

success of this superpower becomes the authorization of continued disregard for international policies. Daniel Deudney and Jeffrey Meiser suggest, “For some Americans, particularly neo-conservatives, intoxicated with power and righteousness, American exceptionalism is a green light, a legitimizing rationale and an all-purpose excuse for ignoring international law and world public opinion...”¹² This “democratic imperialism” aligns with John Ruggie’s notion of American “exemptionalism,” in which the United States advocates a double standard (specifically within ratifying international treaties), with the expectation set for other states to abide by global policy prescriptions that does not necessarily apply to the stars and stripes itself.¹³ The United States, because of its un-relinquished power, has thus been able to play by its own rules and disregard those of the international community.

But the unipolar balance of power propagated by the United States has not always been the case. Andrew Bacevich revealed in the durability of the Western alliance from the 1940s through the 1980s: “When dealing with its partners, Washington did not simply instruct. It negotiated. In short, the United States was able to lead the West because it refrained from abusing the privileges of leadership.”¹⁴ This idea of cooperation and compliance was abandoned and instead the nation moved toward, “exemptions and special status that America claims for itself...in return for this American-provided ‘public good,’ the rest of the world will need to tolerate American departures from adherence to universal rule-based order.”¹⁵ The superpower has recognized its capability to shape international politics and therefore overlooks the opinions of alliances. Fear of losing this power, letting go of the unparalleled success, compels the state and its citizens to validate their exceptional American, democratic system.

To examine the history of domineering political regimes, a pattern becomes clear: the rise and fall of super states appears to be inevitable. To continue on a course to prove the United

States' wielding power is to ensure its deterioration if applied to Reinhold Niebuhr's philosophy: "It offers a foretaste of the consequences awaiting a nation that persists in exempting itself from the rules to which all others must conform."¹⁶ It is no longer prudent for the United States to act in its own self-interest to protect the hegemonic position it has etched itself in the world. This notion of American exceptionalism has an ambiguous connotation as its true definition encompasses more than patriotism. This enduring enactment of leadership not only insists on orchestrating the world stage, but its position exempts it from global governance. This puzzling duality has led me to my research question: How do the ethnocentric tendencies found within American exceptionalism influence the United States to carve its own space within foreign policy, allowing for exceptions to the rule in its practice?

Methodology

In order to better understand the role exceptionalism plays in meriting this American duality, I will be using a qualitative methodology to, first, analyze the concept of ethnocentrism from intercultural communication and second, use the theoretical paradigm of offensive realism from political science in order to demonstrate the strong relationship connecting the two ideas. I will then delve into two case studies which exemplify this phenomenon and its effect on foreign policy: the Kony 2012 campaign and the U.S.'s transgression upon the Biological Weapons Convention. Each will be supported with primary evidence from congressional hearings, international treaties, presidential speeches, nonpartisan polling data, and pertinent information from the Department of Defense and Council on Foreign Relations. Secondary evidence will act as supplemental support and includes scholarly journals, books including Andrew Bacevich's *Limits of Power*, and articles from *The New York Times* and *Foreign Policy*.

Ethnocentrism

The way in which American society as a whole relates with the rest of the world demonstrates an ethnocentric point of view. The term “ethnocentrism” refers to a pattern of seeing things only from one group’s point of view, with the individual or the group usually believing that their point of view, or culture, is superior to all others. This often produces an in-group/out-group dynamic which can lead to prejudice, xenophobia and intergroup violence. The term was originally coined by William Sumner in 1906, who defined it as: “The technical name for the view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything...Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders.”¹⁷ One specific example is state nationalism, the pride one feels towards their country and particular cultural contexts which guide citizens’ lifestyles. Nationalism is present throughout global history and has served as the basis for countless wars, invasions and clashes of civilizations. This idea of ethnocentrism has resonates especially well within Western ideology and specifically American foreign policy. Indeed, the United States’ inflated sense of eminence has allowed the country’s leaders, acting from a fundamentally ethnocentric vantage, to move forward in terms of unilateral rule.

A Western ideology advocating democracy, modernization and liberalism has led to the success of American society. They have established themselves as a model for other nations to follow and emulate; those who fail to do so are cast as an out-group. This Western ideology falls into Edward T. Hall’s analysis of an “irrational” force because of its emphasis on logic: “‘Logic’ enables men to examine ideas, concepts, and mental processes by following low-context paradigms.”¹⁸ Hall comes to reject logic itself as it pushes against one’s cultural programming.

However, some view human nature as conflictual thus calling for more order in the international realm. Therefore, ideologies have become socially constructed, organizational tools implemented to systemize and make sense of the world. Through enculturation, individuals adhere to the ideology which surrounds them and often assume this is the best, if not the only way, to structure society. Imperialism is a grounding example of ethnocentrism towards the colonies. Great nations discovered new lands and imposed their ideologies on the native peoples usually through violence. Instead of examining and absorbing these unfamiliar traditions, newly formed colonies were forced to abandon their way of life and adopt a “superior” lifestyle. This logic is severely flawed in two ways: first, the United States was a British colony and fought to gain their freedom, separate from imperial rule. Secondly, the United States is now imposing its own Western ideology on other parts of the world, especially on underdeveloped countries and non-democratic governments.

The related concept of this Western “ideology” provides a means of further refining our understanding here. As laid out by Jnan Blau, ideology can be thought of four dovetailed tenets. The first is that ideology, at a basic level, can be understood as a set of ideas about how the world is--and/or should be--organized. An ideology can also be referred to, or is variously known, as a specific culture, paradigm or worldview. The second tenet holds that the set of assumptions which are contained within/as a particular ideology are usually static and not open for reinterpretation or revision. Thirdly, these ideas typically favor one group over another, as is evidenced, for example, in several ongoing, contemporary issues such as racism, sexism and classism.¹⁹

The fourth tenet relates to the notion of hegemony, and asks us to tune into how, with ideology it is often the case that a particular set of ideals promotes the oppression of another, less

powerful group. These “inferior” people are often better adapted to accommodating change because it is in their best interest; they become cultural chameleons, adjusting in order to survive and become successful in their environment. The powerful group is able to use their privileged ideological position to maintain this power differential and lack the ability to acclimatize to new situations because there is no need. For example, the ethnocentric expectation of Americans to speak English anywhere in the world has allowed for a linguistic superiority and there is no need for U.S. citizens to learn other languages to get by. However, when foreigners visit the United States, they are virtually required to know English. In a sense, both groups have a superior entitlement than the other (nepotism versus adaptability) but unfortunately, those who are oppressed often face the difficulties of discrimination and must work diligently to abide by the rules prescribed by the powerful.

For the modern Western world, democracy has prevailed as the dominant ideology and those states who differ are thought of as flawed or inferior. Democracy falls into Hall’s description of bureaucratic and institutional irrationality and occurs because, “...bureaucracy in all cultures has a tremendous potential to be counterproductive. This drive towards inefficiency may be a direct consequence of blind adherence to procedure, but it also stems from a bureaucratic needs for self-preservation, and a vulnerability to pressure groups.”²⁰ This idea of self-preservation drives American exceptionalism and explains why the state continues to cling on to an ineffective ideology: the panic of losing its hegemonic position. Although democracy has proven its enduring condition, instances of its ineptness within the United States are obvious: the Occupy Wall Street movement, inadequate healthcare, fraud, corruption. This ideology appears counterproductive and the controversial political maneuvers employed to promote and sustain a Western mindset demonstrate how fear warrants an illogical adherence to democracy.

The ethnocentric tendency of assuming there is no other way, or the inability to imagine one, has led to an aggressive foreign policy in which democracy is the name of the game.

The institutions which have been spawned to support this ideology factor into what Hall lays out regarding the paradox of culture. He states, “The delusional aspects have to do with the institutionalized necessity to control ‘everything,’ and the widely accepted notion that the bureaucrat knows what is best; never for a moment does he doubt the validity of the bureaucratic solution.”²¹ What Hall is saying is that governments give the impression of being a so called “shepherd” who lead and direct its people because of the need for order and control. However, governments do not always tend to their “flock” appropriately and may in fact lead them into perilous situations. A paradox arises when people do not challenge the status quo even if they perceive a problem, which in turn perpetuates the illogical behavior of the state.

As we can see, Hall’s understanding of culture helps shed light on America, its culture and its government’s proceedings, in that U.S. citizens as a whole often fail to question authority, either due to indifference or because they assume the democratic system will act in their best interest. Even though the government does not blatantly infringe upon civil liberties, the same can be said of the international community. Other nations rarely protest against the propagation of the United States’ liberal hegemony. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan show that the U.S. is able to abandon state sovereignty in the name of democratization, regardless if the international community does not agree. This example obviously entails much more circumstantial depth but demonstrates the unchecked power of the United States; this has led to globalization and democratic imperialism, which are not necessarily negative but can be detrimental if prudence and discretion are abandoned.

The world is experiencing a dramatic change; it has shifted from a mindset of colonial imperialism to one of globalization. What once was a vast new world, is becoming increasingly smaller. But, the overarching goal appears to have stayed the same: to be *the* global hegemon. It is no longer about conquering new lands, but instead a matter of ruling over nations through, “...the creation of a world market in goods, services, labor, capital and technology.”²² The commodification of goods is rapidly increasing as anything from food and jeans to ideas and genes are being bought and sold. However, being the leader in a unipolar world (referring to the balance of power in political science in which one state exerts power over others) often gives American corporations the impression that they are able to capitalize on weaker nations to make a profit, which strain relationships. American exceptionalism plays a serious role in globalization as this mentality does not recognize and appreciate diversity. “Although American tradition has been and can be a big influence on other markets and business sectors, we are failing to realize that the way we do business is not the basis for all business.”²³ Failing to recognize and adapt to different cultures in which business is done is indicative of how Americans believe their way of doing things precedes all other cultures. Private business transactions are approached without ethno-relativist consideration, thus foreign policy follows the same pattern.

There is nothing wrong with patriotism, and with being proud of one's country, but this credence of prominence can become delegitimizing. Other nations and international corporations want a sense of mutual understanding and respect, not to be disregarded and taken advantage of. Once cultural differences are understood, “...diversity is a potentially powerful economic resource if organizations view the challenge as an opportunity. In this sense, then, business can capitalize on diversity.”²⁴ If not, the U.S. will fall victim to the dangers of presentism; if it is not able to look beyond “in this moment,” at this time, there is no other way, it must begin to

anticipate tension in the near future. Instead of focusing on short-term profit goals in the quest of globalization, the United States should begin a long-term grand strategy which incorporates cultural understanding into foreign policy, institution building and communication. This is integral to maintain the peaceful change and continuity of history.

Theoretical Paradigm: Offensive Realism

The tendency of the United States to disregard certain realms of foreign policy and its persistent quest to obtain power, align with the basic set of assumptions associated with the theoretical paradigm of offensive realism. This theory is a descendent from Hans Morgenthau's original theory of realism in which the international system is regarded as anarchic and the most prominent actors are sovereign states. Since human nature is conflictual, a state must take any necessary action to secure its endurance. John J. Mearsheimer has transformed this traditional view of realism into a contemporary theory of offensive realism. Along these lines, this new breed of realists, "believe that status quo powers are rarely found in world politics, because the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals, and to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs."²⁵ A power maximizing state, then, recognizes that it must be the most powerful state in the system to survive and the highest goal of its foreign policy is to become the global hegemon.²⁶ The United States' attitude towards its clandestine motives in foreign policy has embraced this paradigm.

As Mearsheimer asserts, the United States has obtained regional hegemony because of its evident domination in the western hemisphere. This position has been validated over the course of time through the foreign policy of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine which deemed any European

involvement within the hemisphere would be considered an aggressive act against the nation. The document has been reinforced to assert the United States' control in the arena, but Mearsheimer believes the regional hegemon will not be satisfied and will aim to maintain a balance of power between "peer competitors" in a nearby region.²⁷ However, instead of participating in offshore balancing or ruling from afar, this dualistic hegemon has insisted upon occupying other states, disregarding sovereignty. Mearsheimer theorizes, "the best way for a state to survive in anarchy is to take advantage of other states and gain power at their expense." The United States has thus honed in on this presumption as its military forces are omnipresent throughout the globe. Although Americans attempt to be tactful when rationalizing their interventionist foreign policies, according to offensive realism the underlying basis is the attainment of power.

According to G. John Ikenberry, a prominent international relations scholar, seeking security within the anarchic system has its consequences, because when it "tries to solve security problems by exercising power and wielding force, it triggers resistance and hostility that ultimately makes it harder for the United States to achieve security goals."²⁸ The U.S.'s governmental budget has a large portion of it dedicated to the military, especially its expansion abroad. In 2011 alone, Barak Obama proposed a defense budget of \$708 billion, which includes \$549 billion in discretionary budget authority to fund base defense programs and \$159 billion to support overseas contingency operations.²⁹ This substantial monetary allotment is justified every year for the purpose of national security and subsequently the accumulation of more power. However, the way in which the United States attempts to guard itself translates as aggressive and delegitimizes acquired power in the process.

Case Study: Kony 2012 Campaign

From the realist perspective, the lack of cultural considerations within foreign policy is explained because the state is self-interested. However, overlooking these aspects factor in to perpetuating an ethnocentric perspective. The United States, along with its citizens, often oppose instances of human rights violations and demand a shift, but only by relying on their Western perspective in which altruistic actions become unwanted. With the advent of social media and instantaneous news reporting, people have become more aware of and exposed to global events. These events, in turn, can often ignite demonstrations by the people who call upon government(s) to solve a social injustice.

On Monday, March 5, 2012, Invisible Children released a YouTube video and corresponding campaign which went viral within a matter of days, accumulating over 67 million views. The Invisible Children organization works with volunteers to spread awareness and advocacy work around the world about the Ugandan conflict. They have made previous videos concerning the atrocities which have taken place, but the Kony 2012 movement has gained considerable attention. On the website, their mission is simple: “Kony 2012 is a film and campaign by Invisible Children that aims to make Joseph Kony famous, not to celebrate him, but to raise support for his arrest and set a precedent for international justice.”³⁰ The 30-minute video highlights the ongoing crisis in Uganda and surrounding countries where Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group, has abducted more than 30,000 children over the last 30 years and has forced them to become soldiers or sex slaves. “The LRA has earned a reputation for its cruel and brutal tactics, when Joseph Kony found himself running out of fighters, he started abducting children to be soldiers in his army or ‘wives’ for his officers.

The LRA is encouraged to rape, mutilate, and kill civilians--often without blunt weapons.” The empowering video is a call to action:

It’s hard to look back on some parts of human history because when we heard about injustice, we cared but we didn’t know what to do. Too often we did nothing. But if we’re going to change that, we have to start somewhere. So we’re starting here, with Joseph Kony, because now we know what to do. Here it is. Ready? In order for Kony to be arrested this year, the Ugandan military has to find him. In order to find him, they need the technology and training to track him in the vast jungle. That’s where the American advisors come in. But in order for the American advisors to be there, the U.S. Government has to deploy them. They’ve done that, but if the government doesn’t believe the people care about arresting Kony, the mission will be canceled. In order for people to care, they have to know. And they will only know if Kony’s name is everywhere.

The campaign strives to make the war lord famous by reaching out to “Policymakers” and “Culturemakers,” (celebrities, personalities, entrepreneurs), to purchase a \$30 Action Kit, agree to a monthly donation, and/or repost the video and corresponding photo to share via social media platforms. All of this is to make the U.S. government realize this problem, keep current troops in the area and make catching Kony a priority for foreign policy.

Although a small campaign in contrast to other humanitarian causes, change starts somewhere. This goal is small, yet achievable, and it ignites a bigger movement for the people to make demands on a larger scale. Kony 2012 has the potential to become a new wave of protests and campaigns by highlighting the inherent power of social media. A new tool for the next generation. However, this development focuses on a small niche within the African continent. More children have died in the last three years from malaria than in the 30 years Kony has been active.³¹ The campaign overlooks the needs of the Ugandan people and casts them as helpless, weak Africans and they need the idealistic Westerners to save them. Not only are the goals of the campaign ethnocentric but it is commodifying altruistic behaviors. I am interested in unpacking and analyzing the Kony campaign because it can shed light on how American exceptionalism is

fundamental within American culture. American citizens perceive the situation in Uganda necessary of governmental intervention and therefore are campaigning to bring attention to it.

It is no surprise Kony 2012 has garnered considerable amounts of backlash thus far. It represents how the Western world believes that its way of life is correct and exerts its ideology onto developing countries. This is not to downplay the atrocities Kony and the LRA have committed, but instead to critique the way in which Invisible Children and the millions of followers assess the problem and demand American intervention. “Americans habitually imagine themselves as a morally elevated people set apart from the rest of the world and living in a land of opportunity that is the envy and aspiration of humankind...the United States customarily identifies itself as an exception to the rule of human history-as an innocent nation exempt from earthly constraints and endowed with the manifest destiny of a chosen people.”³² The campaign wants to make Kony a foreign policy priority and use military intervention to capture him. However, this objective needs to factor in other circumstances before it becomes a contradiction within itself.

The video campaign does an excellent job of consolidating the issue, making it accessible to wide variety of individuals. However, it fails to further flesh out the efforts already being made: in November 2011 the United Nations and the Security Council convened to discuss the violent rebel group as well as President Obama who announced in October 2011 that he would be “sending combat-equipped troops on a kill-or-capture mission to take out Kony.”³³ It is clear troops and resources have already been dedicated to alleviate the human suffering, however, the video portrays the situation as if it is an unheard of or overlooked atrocity. Indeed, the American people were probably unaware or misinformed in the situation, but a call for further military action for something which is being addressed seems illogical. Perhaps the Kony 2012 campaign

attempted to use the voice of the democratic citizens to demand their government to take a more active role. Besides the white man's burden, this is indicative of American exceptionalism because the people believe the United States has the responsibility to intervene even with economic troubles at home and just getting out of armed conflict abroad; because of the U.S.'s position in the world, the government and its citizens often fail to realize when their capabilities are being spread too thin.

A point of hypocrisy to note is that Invisible Children report Joseph Kony as the number one criminal on the International Criminal Court's most wanted list; the United States is not a member of the ICC. The United Nations created the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court in 1998 and entered into force until July 1, 2002. Its purpose was to become "the world's first permanent court mandated to bring to justice the perpetrators of the worst crime known to humankind---war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide---when national courts are unable to do so."³⁴ The United States originally signed the treaty on December 31, 2000, but failed to ever ratify it, later stating, "that the United States does not intend to become a party to the treaty. Accordingly, the United States has no legal obligations arising from its signature..."³⁵ It is sanctimonious for the Kony campaign to assert it wants to aid the ICC in capturing this warlord with the assistance of U.S. troops, since it backed out of the treaty in May of 2002. However, this is not the only instance in which American exemptionalism plays out on the international stage.

Case Study: Biological Weapons Convention

As the case of the Kony Campaign makes clear, it is important to understand the nature and intricacies of international treaties. International treaties and their corresponding committees

commence to begin a process of multinational agreement on a specified issue or dilemma. Whether or not a treaty acts as international law depends heavily upon the framing of the document, possible interpretation of definitions and potential sanctions of said affair. The treaty ratification process present in the United States seems to provide loopholes in adhering to the decree. A treaty can be approved by the Senate, but can only be ratified by the executive branch;³⁶ thus, the United States is able to appear accommodating to the requests of other nations seeking its approval, but ostensibly can disregard its prescriptions with no repercussions since it has yet to be ratified. However, if it benefits or believes strongly in a treaty, the state has the luxury to use hard or soft power to force other nations to ratify. Soft power refers to persuasive techniques to make a state comply while hard power incorporate economic sanctions and militarization. The U.S. demonstrates its sanctimonious capability to manipulate foreign policy to satisfy its needs while concurrently pressuring non-compliant states, typically with force, into submission.

The United States also exhibits a predisposition to having a vague interpretation of those treaties which are ratified. Let us look at a specific example to ground our understanding and make the point clearer. A very prominent example is the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention of 1972, which was the first multilateral disarmament treaty banning the production of an entire category of weapons. This ratified the 1925 Geneva Protocol which prohibited the use, but not the possession or development of chemical and biological weapons. The Convention bans “the development, production, stockpiling, acquisition and retention of microbial or other biological agents or toxins, in types and in quantities that have no justification for prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes. It also bans weapons, equipment or means of delivery designed to use such agents or toxins for hostile purposes or in armed conflict.”³⁷ However, the

treaty contained no verification mechanism and provided no sanctions with “teeth,” therefore limiting the treaty’s effectiveness.

In President Nixon’s address to the Senate in 1972 regarding the treaty he stated, “It was about two years ago that this Government renounced, unilaterally and unconditionally, the use of all biological and toxin weapons and affirmed that we would destroy our existing stocks and confine our programs to strictly defensive purposes.”³⁸ In addition to becoming a “significant advance in the field of arms control and disarmament,” the destruction of existing weapons was justifiable because of their alleged ineffectiveness and difficulty of manufacturing and dispersion. From then on, any country secretly creating weapons would be considered to be in breach of international law. However, the U.S. sustained a loose interpretation of the word “intent,” establishing a loophole within the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC) and therefore justified their decision to engage in peaceful research to create defensive weapons to counter potential offensive ones.

Several CIA programs brushed against the “forbidden” category of weapons, but posited that their research mimicked that of a non-state actor, to better protect the country from such threats. In one program, named Clear Vision, the CIA, “built and tested a model of a Soviet-designed germ bomb that agency officials feared was being sold on the international market...it lacked a fuse and other parts that would make it a working bomb.” This is in clear violation of the BWC no matter what interpretation was used to analyze its purpose. The CIA defended itself and “continued to insist that it had the legal authority to conduct such tests and...the agency was prepared to reopen the fight over how to interpret the treaty.”³⁹ This broad understanding of the definition of “defensive” allowed the United States to assert its authority by clearly deviating from the intrinsic nature of the treaty and experienced zero ramifications. Furthermore,

innocuous stockpiles of authorized vaccines (which the development undergoes exactly the same initial steps of biological weapons), are failing in their countermeasure purposes. The National Biodefense Science Board reported what is, “Especially troubling is the lack of priority given to the development of medical countermeasures--the vaccines and medicines that would be required to mitigate the consequences of an attack.”⁴⁰ As we can see, the United States’ attempt to legitimize research of potential offensive weapons to strike back militarily characterizes its retaliative nature but provides an insufficient explanation of the devalued power of a vaccine which would protect its own citizens.

Throughout the 1990s, vigorous steps were taken to add a verification protocol to the BWC in which member states would report annually to the United Nations regarding the defensive measures undertaken in researching biological weapons. However, after the anthrax scare but before 9/11, the U.S. reviewed the proposed biological weapons policy and decided that the verification protocol did not suit its national interests. “A seven-year negotiating effort to create a compliance system collapsed in 2001 when the Bush Administration abruptly rejected the draft protocol, saying it could lead to harassment of U.S. Government laboratories and undermine U.S. regulations against exporting technology used in bioweapons.”⁴¹ The secrecy shrouding such research raises genuine questions as to what these laboratories were attempting to hide. In addition, to the 163 nations who were in compliance with the treaty, this was a demonstration of blatant hypocrisy.

Implications

An exceptional-exemptional duality has transpired within the United States. The self-perception of its world-level aspirations is to not only protect its own state-sovereignty but to

propagate its liberal hegemony. However, allies, enemies and neutrals can interpret this tendency to bend the rules of world order as insolence, and often become weary of its exponential power. Indeed: “The United States has the capacity to dominate but not legitimacy to rule---it has power but not authority.”⁴² The two cursory case studies above---my examination of the cultural impact of the Kony 2012 efforts, and my look at the finer points and implication of international treaty transgressions---highlight this dualism of the United States. The United States, we see, has the ability to violate prevailing policies, reinterpret those which do not align with its preferred measures and to produce secrecy around programs of national security, undeniably allowing it to do as it pleases with little to no apprehensiveness of punishment. This leads to a complex paradox: while governmental decision makers endeavor to make the country safer by further expanding its hegemonic power, it generates uneasiness within other nations and brings the United States’ legitimacy into question.

From a political science perspective, international relations scholars Andrew Bacevich and G. John Ikenberry both agree that the “military option” in implementing foreign policy is not the answer. Bacevich’s “power is finite” resonates with Ikenberry’s liberal internationalism 2.5: the United States must renegotiate its hegemonic position in the world or lose it all together. Reinhold Niebuhr prophesied, “To the end of history, social orders will probably destroy themselves in the effort to prove that they are indestructible.”⁴³ Yet far from being a warmonger or a garrison state, the United States covets power in a similar practice.

Furthermore, as I have endeavored to show, the cultural significance of all this plays an important role in understanding the dynamic. Ethnocentric proclivities emanate from a fear of losing power. Historian Margaret MacMillian defines this dualism as:

American exceptionalism has always had two sides: the one eager to set the world to rights, the other ready to turn its back with contempt if its message should be ignored...Faith in their own exceptionalism has

sometimes led to a certain obtuseness on the part of Americans, a tendency to preach at other nations rather than listen to them, a tendency as well to assume that American motives are pure where those of others are not.⁴⁴

Different threats have rivaled the United States' power and the panic of American decline often evokes the ethnocentric characteristics demonstrated in U.S. foreign policy. This fear of potential collapse has captured the zeitgeist over the last several decades which has ignited instances of aggressive international interactions. The threat of communism, the terrorist attacks of September 11th and now with the rise of China have demonstrated a blow to American superiority, providing, it seems, no end to this way of proceeding, both culturally and geopolitically.

As a student of communication studies, this topic of the American duality and my research here leaves me with the following important insights: politics as a whole has a lot to gain from utilizing an ethnorelativist perspective. I believe the United States is aware of how its ethnocentric tendencies translates into foreign policy but remains unaffected by the consequences as it remains determined to avoid decline. This fear of losing its exceptional qualities in combination with seemingly infinite power, allows its to disregard rules and norms that do not fit its agenda. This superiority complex resonates not only within the government, but in the citizens as well. Since the materialization of the American dream, Americans possess an inherent belief that their norms, customs and government is what the rest of the world strives to emulate. If they lose this identity, they are left with a dysfunctional government, poverty, debt, obesity, greenhouse gases...the list continues.

What I have come to realize is that the foreign policy of the United States has been implemented to preserve this identity of exceptionalism. America seems to have abandoned speaking softly and instead only uses a big stick to maintain power. Decline has been deemed

taboo, even though countless articles have hypothesized what it would mean if a shift in power occurred. The United States does not wish to acknowledge the reality of great empires which have fallen before it and instead strives to hold on to its perceived, unequalled qualities and negligent behavior. However, if it continues to exempt itself from the governing laws and norms of the international community, the power to which it so dearly clings to will eventually exist beyond its exceptional reach.

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