American Exceptionalism and its Malleability:
An Examination of Presidential Rhetoric in State of the Union Addresses

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1. Introduction and Terminology

“The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind.”
-Thomas Pain, Common Sense 1776

“We must always consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill-the eyes of all people are upon us.”
-John Winthrop, 1630

“If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read: Vietnam.”
-Martin Luther King, 1967

“A confident and care free republic — the city on the hill, whose people have always believed that they are immune from history's harms — now has to confront not only an unending imperial destiny but also a remote possibility that seems to haunt the history of empire: hubris followed by defeat.”
-Michael Ignatieff, 2003

“But when viewed through the lens of exceptionalism, even the worst atrocities can become tolerable to the historically challenged..."American exceptionalism," it would be a perfect tombstone for that most dangerous of American myths.”
-Oliver Stone, 2013

“I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”
-James Baldwin

1.1 Introduction

When I studied abroad in Australia, I was fortunate enough to live with other international students from all over the world; I was able to gain new perspectives, not afforded to me in the United States. I remember my Singaporean roommate, John, asking me why Americans think they live in the best country. I can recall spouting off some sentiment about liberty, freedom, and democracy, but even then I realized I was
not sure I understood the reasoning behind my answer or if it were even true. I had never really thought about why I believed that the United States was the best, I had always believed this notion because it was an idea that had been instilled within me since I can remember. Through the teachings in my personal life, the media, and within academia, I had been taught that my country was the best in the world and all others paled in comparison. How many other Americans are guilty of this same train of thought? This sparked an interest in me on the topic of the United States and its belief in self-greatness, more commonly referred to as American Exceptionalism.

1.2 Thesis Niche

It is important to me as a citizen of the United States to research this topic to stimulate critical thought on the topic of American Exceptionalism. When you understand your own identity and who you are, it affects how you interact with others. The same can be true for the U.S., when you understand your national identity you can better understand the United States’ interactions with other nations. American Exceptionalism has the ability to affect many facets of life: national identity, international relations, which in turn, can have global consequences, both good and bad, and how other nations see the United States. Lastly, this topic is important for me personally because it will allow some insight into my own national identity.

One does not need to be a scholar to notice that conflict is everywhere. Therefore, there is an obvious need for conflict resolution in the modern-day world. Specific to this thesis, the United States’ recent conflict in the Middle East is still looming
over the public’s heads. American Exceptionalism, synonymously hubris, is an instigator to conflict; hence, this is one major reason to study it (Scheuer, 2004). One of American Exceptionalism’s major characteristics, which will be discussed later more in depth, is the idea of spreading democracy and the ‘American way’ to other nations. In Scheuer’s book, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror*, he brings up the point that hubris-hungry U.S. leaders, elites, and media are not facing reality and are instead, “locked behind an impenetrable wall of political correctness and moral cowardice, act(ing) as naïve and arrogant cheerleaders for the universal applicability of Western values and feckless overseas military operations...” (2004: p.1). He goes on to state these military operations are not theoretical, they have been executed and omnipotently titled Enduring Freedom, Carpathian Strike, Infinite Justice, Valiant Strike, and Vigilante Guard among many more.

Through the hubris-hungry endeavor of the Iraq War the United States has allowed first the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and now ISIL to regroup, consequentially enabling those groups to wage intense and lethal insurgencies (Scheuer, 2004). The re-grouping and rise of groups like these has dire consequences for the rest of the world when the groups mobilize and attack. Studying American Exceptionalism allows for society as a whole to understand the part we play in creating and/or maintaining these insurgent groups and how to minimize the chance of conflict created by them.
1.3 Thesis Statement

After delving into the current literature on American Exceptionalism, I have honed in on my topic of American Exceptionalism’s malleability and what it can be molded into. I will explore the question of whether American Exceptionalism can be weakened specifically by failed military interventions? To answer this question, I will primarily be looking at two military interventions that are widely accepted as either failures or in the process of failing: The Vietnam War and the Iraq War. I will predict that after examining State of the Union Addresses there will be a decrease in use of rhetoric about American Exceptionalism during the time periods of the Iraq War and Vietnam War compared to all other time periods. My second research question inquires if Republican presidents use more American Exceptionalism rhetoric than Democratic presidents. My third research question asks if American Exceptionalism rhetoric is used more during times of war than during times of peace. I plan to explore these questions through examination of presidential speeches, specifically State of the Union Addresses from 1965 to 2016.

1.4 Literature review

There is still a large gap between those who believe in American Exceptionalism and those who believe that that theory is a myth: inevitably there will be variability depending from which perspective the authors of the literature are writing from. It can be said that many academics outside of the political arena, and a few within, disagree with the notion of American Exceptionalism. A reason for politicians
taking stances to affirm American Exceptionalism are that politicians would be heavily criticized if they stated an opposition to American Exceptionalism and showed some doubt and disapproval for their country, therefore many are in favor and support of it to ensure job security.

Many authors have narrowed in on the Vietnam War experience as having contributed to the decline, or at least a portion of the decline, in the popular sense of American Exceptionalism (Lipset, 1996; Davis & Lynn-Jones, 1987; Priest, 2009; McCrisken, 2003). Due to this line of thought, my first question asks if there is less American Exceptionalism rhetoric during time periods of failed military wars, i.e., the Vietnam War and the Iraq War. Although, McCrisken (2003) shows that American exceptionalism was used as an attempt to save-face in the wake of the Vietnam failure and it was therefore strengthened. This is in line with social identity theory, the in-group increases self-esteem when they fail by distancing themselves from the out-group; effectively using American Exceptionalism to portray greatness over other nations to save face in the wake of failure. The first line of thought, that the Vietnam failure had contributed to the decline in the sense of American Exceptionalism, has more research to back it up and therefore is the premise for my first question.

The United States is currently in the last stages of the Iraq War; the majority of United States forces have been pulled out, leaving ‘trainers’ there to maintain some amount of presence. Although the Iraq War is still technically going on, we can still label the Iraq War a failure because it led to intense strained relations and
friction within the country of Iraq and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL).

First, it is important to understand what American Exceptionalism is and where it came from. Then this thesis will argue that American Exceptionalism is a facet of social identity theory to show American Exceptionalism’s place in the context of the international stage. One problem with American Exceptionalism is that the concept doesn’t have one single agreed-upon definition; it is widely debated throughout and between the academic, political, and everyday worlds. American Exceptionalism today is commonly defined as the belief that the United States has distinguishable characteristics that set it apart from all other nations, and places the United States as almost always better than other countries (Lipset, 1996; Lockhart, 2003; Madsen, 1998). Other scholars have defined it as the belief that the U.S. has a special and unique part in history and is distinguishably different from the Old World, while being resistant to the inevitable fall that all other previous republics have faced (Restad, H. E., 2013). Former U.S. President Abraham Lincoln even went on to declare that God’s last chance for humanity would be the New World and that the U.S. is the “last best hope of man on Earth” (Lincoln, 1862).

The idea of Exceptionalism, often credited to Alexis de Tocqueville, has a meaning of being unique in relation to all other nations (Tocqueville, 1981). Tocqueville then expands that notion to encompass American Exceptionalism by demonstrating how the United States had had no feudal past, while other countries did, inherently
making it exceptional (Tocqueville, 1981). According to Horsman (1986), the notion of Exceptionalism can be traced back to the Germanic tribes who lived outside of the Roman Empire, often studied by Tocqueville. These Germanic tribes were linked to Anglo Saxons, who were thought to be ethnically pure (Horsman, 1986, p.5). Throughout time, like many groups of people, the Germanic tribes spread out westward through Europe and distant decedents eventually made it to the New World. Therefore, the early settlers of the new America were eager to link their language and ancestry to their Anglo Saxon past and to its more aloof Aryan roots because of this expansion to the west (Horsman, 1986). This in turn would then justify the taking of North America and solidify their belief of being an exceptional people. This was described by Horsman (1986, p.5) when he stated, “They could and did conceive of themselves as the most vital and energetic of those Aryan peoples who had spilled westward, ‘revitalized’ the Roman Empire, spread throughout Europe to England, and crossed the Atlantic in their relentless westward drive.” Hence, the people of the United States not only believed that they were a chosen people, but that they were a chosen people with a pristine ancestry who were innately endowed with the ability to create and maintain perfect governmental institutions and achieve world dominance (Horsman, 1986).

Genetics played a part in the development of Exceptionalism, but religiosity, specifically Christianity, was a key aspect as well. The New World had been deemed by most as a new Garden of Eden, a new chance, for God’s chosen people, the Europeans, and specifically those who could trace their lineage back to the Germanic tribes
(Horsman, 1986, p.11). It was God’s choice to give His people the chance at success and it was His last chance for perfection on Earth. So how do you refute God’s will? You do not, quite simply. How does one argue against God? You cannot. Therefore, this was proof that North America was for the taking and that the settlers were destined for Exceptionalism.

Due to their ancestry and religious beliefs, they had a sense of entitlement to the land. Being, “puritan colonists, Revolutionary patriots, conquerors of the wilderness, and creators of an immense material prosperity” the people of the United States had all of the empirical evidence they needed to deem themselves an exceptional people (Horsman, 1986, p.5). Throughout history the United States has successfully stabilized colonies, gained independence, expanded westward, freed our slaves, maintained a sovereign state, won World War I and World War II, therefore, the people of the United States had had proof of a clear pattern that they were exceptional from their inception (Horsman, 1986).

Three other researchers have completed prominent works looking at American Exceptionalism through presidential speeches. The first, Hmjarz and Krstić (2015), looked only at President Obama’s speeches. They showed that American Exceptionalism is an important part of U.S. identity, possibly even seeing American Exceptionalism as the equivalent to American identity (Hmjarz & Krstić, 2015). The rest of Hmjarz and Krstić’s (2015) research revolved around President Obama’s use of American Exceptionalism and how it affected his specific foreign policies.
The second article is by Gilmore (2014), who looks at how American Exceptionalism is presented in presidential speeches differently for international audiences and domestic audiences. Although this research focuses solely on domestic speeches, namely State of the Union Addresses, some related information was discussed. While researching American Exceptionalism and presidential discourse, Gilmore (2014) says that the president is seen as the embodiment of the United States and the public looks to him or her to promote the collective national identity and national pride. Gilmore suggests that the decline of American Exceptionalism is not due to U.S. failures, but due to globalization and the rise of other world powers like China and the European Union.

Gilmore (2014) goes on to specify the different aspects of American Exceptionalism. The first theme of American Exceptionalism is that the United States is a singular nation, unique and different from all other nations in the world (Lipset, 1996; Madsen, 1998). The United States is the ‘single global exception’. The United States was the first new nation in the New World, the first nation to gain independence, the first nation to enact a new style of government, and attained a swifter development than other colonies and a swifter rise into the field of international relations (Gilmore, 2014, p. 2420). Due to these differences from other nations, the United States was ennobled and set-apart from other nations because it possessed unique qualities that only the United States possessed. This thesis will examine and code State of the Union Addresses for statements containing uniqueness or as Gilmore (2014) states it, singularity.
The second theme of American Exceptionalism is the aspect of superiority; the belief that the United States is inherently better in comparison to the rest of the countries in the world (Gilmore, 2014). This perspective distinguishes the United States as being better, finer, grander, and more preferable to other nations (Gilmore, 2014). Gilmore (2014) traces this core characteristic of superiority back to just after World War II when the United States came out victoriously and Americans saw themselves as ahead of the rest of the world and the fact that United States’ leaders praised the U.S. as being morally superior to Russia throughout the Cold War. Superiority can be an over-exaggeration of the core idea of singularity with overlaps in deciphering and coding for differences within research. This thesis will subsequently look at presidential rhetoric and take into account this core theme of superiority and embed it into social identity theory, attempting to differentiate superiority from singularity.

The last theme of American Exceptionalism is one of religiousness, including the suggestion that the United States is favored by God to play a special role in the world. In other words, Madsen (1998) categorizes the United States is an “elect nation” and Gilmore (2014) refers to the United States in relation to this core characteristic as a “redeemer nation”, the last saving grace for the world; a nation that would be a beacon for the rest of the world. Further, this component of American Exceptionalism allows Americans to award themselves and their country a remarkable status based on a metaphysical conviction, instead of basing their opinion on empirical and substantial evidence. Within this thesis the religiousness characteristic will be coded for in a
miscellaneous category of American Exceptionalism since it is not of particular interest to the questions being asked. All three of these themes play a part in the overall concept of American Exceptionalism and will be elaborated in the methods portion of this study.

The third examination of U.S. State of the Union Addresses for Exceptionalism rhetoric is Neumann and Coe (2012), who agree that looking at presidential rhetoric is a good way to look at the popular opinion of the people because the president is normally in line with the majority. It has been argued that Presidents H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton often used Exceptionalism to foster national pride during and after the success of the Cold War (Neumann & Coe, 2012). Neumann and Coe (2012) also state that it is common for there to be high uses of American Exceptionalism rhetoric by presidents in post-war eras, citing The Vietnam and the Cold War.

Neumann and Coe (2012) measure American Exceptionalism by combining multiple measures: how the president refers to their country as either The United States of America or United States, our nation, and our country; the extent to which the president mentions the nation relative to the extent they mention other countries; statements of painting America as the ‘good guy’ while others are seen as ‘bad’ nations (challenging or dissenting the world order as seen by America); and lastly by how the president positions the United States in relation to other nations. Neumann and Coe (2012) found that Republicans have shown an impulse towards Exceptionalism more so than Democrats have, countering previous claims made by McEvoy-Levy (2001). This is
where my second question comes into play: seeing if Neumann and Coe’s (2012) or McEvoy-Levy’s (2001) findings will hold true.

Neumann and Coe (2012) and Gilmore (2014) overlap not only in the topics they research, but they also agree on the theoretical framework within which they place American Exceptionalism. Both authors embed American Exceptionalism within the idea of social identity theory. Gilmore (2014) also adds that this is extremely potent because American Exceptionalism paints the United States in a positive manner and positions it above other countries.

1.4.2 American Exceptionalism within a Framework: Social Identity Theory

Exceptionalism of any form can be applied to the concept of social identity theory. Henri Tajfel and John Turner contributed the Theory of Social Identity to the field of Psychology in 1979. They suggested that the groups that people have membership in serve as an important source of self-esteem and pride; that these groups we belong to give individuals a sense of belonging in the world (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). To maintain and increase the positive outcomes of a positive group image, the in-group often times enhances and builds up its own self-image, while lowering the image of the out-group to show dissimilarity according to Tajfel and Turner (1979). This fits nicely with the concept of American Exceptionalism, which builds up the uniqueness and greatness of America in comparison to all other countries, purposefully distancin g in-group members from those in the out-group.
Social identity theory has experimentally been shown to exist, first seen in one study completed by Tajfel (1970). Tajfel’s (1970) study included children aged 14 to 15 years old. The aim of this study consisted of two parts: part one attempted to establish categorization of the participants, while part two assessed the effects of the categorization on intergroup behavior. This experimental procedure is commonly known as the minimal group paradigm (MGP). In this experimental procedure, participants are first differentiated and grouped according to some arbitrary characteristic (i.e. favorite color). Then the participants are asked to allocate resources to in-group or out-group members relative to pairings of numbers for the in and out group. When the in-group would receive the most resources and the out-group would receive slightly less resources that was called maximizing. When the in-group would receive less than they would maximizing, but the out-group received a lot less than this in-group was referred to as maximum distance.

In this experiment Tajfel (1970) found that social categorization did happen and was enough to produce discrimination and conflict, that individuals favored their own group members over members of out-groups based on very minimal, flimsy, and arbitrary differences like being categorized for an experiment where the participants were really no different from the ‘other’. The Tajfel (1970) study also showed that maximizing differences between the in-group and out-group was the most important factor in making decisions for the group.
Interestingly we can look further into this line of thinking about maximizing
distance between groups. If you look at the premise of American Exceptionalism, one of
its key aspects is differentiating Americans from non-Americans and expanding the
social distance between the in-group (Americans) and the out-group (non-Americans).
This categorization is also based on arbitrary qualifications for group membership as
seen in Tajfel’s (1970) study. That qualification simply being geography. The one thing
that holds true for every single American is that they were either born in the United
States or are a naturalized citizen; that is it. Yet based on this one precondition for group
membership, other assumptions are made; Americans are the smartest, bravest,
greatest, and most unique individuals different from all others according to American
Exceptionalism

Other examples of social identity theory and in-groups and out-groups in the real
world are the Hutu and Tutsi people of Rwanda, whites and blacks in South Africa during
Apartheid, and Germans and Jews in Nazi Germany, to name a few. These are
established in-groups and out-groups in different intergroup conflicts that exhibit many
of the characteristics that Turner (1970) describes in his findings on social identity
theory and the Minimal Group Paradigm. The groups in these examples have
categorized themselves into groups, identified with a specific group, and compared
themselves, the in-group, to the other, the out-group.

In and out-groups are created and maintained through three mental processes
suggested by Tajfel & Turner (1979): social categorization, social identification, and
social comparison. Human beings categorize objects and such to save cognitive energy and to better understand the ‘things’ we encounter in everyday life. This allows for faster decision-making and more efficient use of cognitive effort (Piaget, 1928). If every time a human encountered a dog and had to dissect the different parts, e.g., this thing has a tail, four legs, a snout, and paws, it would be a waste of time and energy.

Therefore, as humans, we categorize things in our brains. In terms of categorizing humans, we can assign a person to a group, which can tell us things about the people we categorize. For example, if we categorize an individual as a preacher one could assume that that individual is well read in scripture, moral, easy to talk to, church-going, and utilizes prayer. Some of these may be incorrect assumptions, but for the most part are fairly common for individuals labeled as ‘preachers’. Conversely, we can learn a lot about ourselves by the groups that we categorize ourselves in. Categorizing someone as an American one could prematurely assume that individuals in this category are individualistic, Democratic, selfish, and/or egotistical.

The second cognitive process that Tajfel et. al (1979) proposed is social identification. This is a process where individuals espouse the identity of the group that they identify with. For example, if you categorize yourself as a parent then you will adopt the identity of a parent and act accordingly in ways that you believe a parent should act. In this way individuals are conforming to group norms. When an individual identifies with a group and attaches their own identity to the group, that individual’s self-esteem is then bound to that group and membership of said group (Tajfel, et. al,
1979). This can be applied to the example of socially identifying as an American. Americans will act in ways they think Americans should act and when that social group is threatened or harmed the individuals own self-esteem is then tied to the larger group of ‘Americans’ and affected accordingly.

The last cognitive process described within social identity theory is social comparison (Tajfel, et. al, 1979). This is a process where once people are categorized into different groups and have identified with them we tend to compare these different groups (Tajfel, et. al, 1979). If an individual’s self-esteem needs to be maintained and positive, then the groups the individual identifies with need to be compared favorably to other groups. When two groups then compare themselves to one another they are then competing. This competition between groups helps us to understand prejudice.

According to social identity theory, another way of building up in-group self-image is discriminating and having prejudiced views of the out-group (McLeod, 2008). “Prejudice is a rich, complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon, grounded in the primary, instinctual nature of human thinking”, according to Paul (1993, p.206). In line with that train of thought, prejudice can be defined as an unjust feeling for a group or individual due to their sex, race, religion, or other physical or cultural marker, especially when it is not logical or rational to do so (Paul, 1993). As a parallel, American Exceptionalism is not based on scientific findings or logical thought processes. It is a notion that has been passed down through generations without critical analysis. Most of us in the modern-day do not believe that just because someone is a white Christian--two of the main
tenets of American Exceptionalism--they are better than all others, yet people still believe in the American Exceptionalism that was founded on those principles.

Although American Exceptionalism is for America or ‘for’ a concept and prejudice is against something or someone specific, an ‘anti’ concept, American Exceptionalism still fits within the framework of social identity theory, which states that prejudice is a part of building up the in-group. If we think of part of the concept of American Exceptionalism as prejudice, we can apply Paul’s (1993) theory of prejudice being passed down by the mores of past generations, being given little thought, but having weight in developing a national identity. Paul (1993) goes on to state that prejudices are easily cultivated under pseudonyms like loyalty, patriotism, or self-defense and that ethnocentrism, the notion that one’s own group is the center of everything and all others are judged in relation to that, is often manifested under the name of patriotism. We can easily define American Exceptionalism as a similar concept. We, as Americans, do not think of ourselves as prejudiced towards other countries, but view ourselves as patriotic in our fidelity to the United States. Sure, people in other places in the world love their own country, but do they also think they are exceptional in the same way that many of the people of the United States believe themselves to be?

1.4.3 American Exceptionalism in the Modern World

Two Pew Research Polls surveyed registered voters, one in 2011 and one in 2014. From 2011 to 2014, Republicans had dropped 15%, from 52% to 37%, in saying that the US ‘Stands above all other countries’ (Tyson, 2014, para:6). The trend is similar
for Independents and Democrats, but averaging a drop of only 7.5%, from 33% to 25.5%. According to the same poll, most people in the United States think that the United States is great, but fewer think the U.S. is the greatest: with three in ten Americans think the United States is the greatest, while six out of every ten people in the United States believe that the United States is one of the greatest countries, and one out of every ten people of the United States believing that some other country or countries are better than the U.S. (Tyson, 2014). In addition, young people are far less likely to think that the United States stands above other countries, only 15% under the age of 30 expressed that view and the group that is most likely to believe in US superiority are those 65 and older (Tyson, 2014). Overall, there is a divide between parties, ages, and many more sub-groups of Americans on the topic of American greatness, showing that in recent years the trend of American Exceptionalism has been on the decline. To summarize, Tharoor (2012, para. 8) said it best, “Some could see in this a gloomy picture of a young generation disillusioned with their country. But I prefer to see something else: A Twenty First Century recognition of the world’s complexity, and that the American story is not the only one worth telling.”

Cohen (2011) provides insight into the idea of European greatness from a European perspective. He states that greatness, in his opinion, leads to trouble and that Europe has finished with greatness. Europe has made attempts at greatness and because of that it has been damaged, whether it was in The Great War where over 20 million civilians and combatants were killed, the million people who died in Ireland’s
Great Famine, or the over hundred thousand who were killed before France departed from Algeria to name a few (Cohen, 2011). The most notorious of examples of greatness and Exceptionalism gone awry would have to be Nazi Germany. The Nazi party believed in Aryan greatness, that they were racially superior and therefore entitled to world dominance. Was Germany during the 1930’s and 1940’s an example of what Exceptionalism looks like in other countries?

President Vladimir Putin of Russia authored a plea to the United States’ people and political leaders in relation to the potential attack on Syria that the U.S. was ready to launch in 2013. American Exceptionalism may not be viewed the same way by the rest of the world as Americans see it themselves. Putin (para:10, 2013) writes that, “Millions around the world increasingly see the United States not as a model of democracy but as relying on brute force, cobbling coalitions together under the slogan, ‘You’re either with us or against us.’” Putin (2013) urges at the end of his plea, noting Obama’s reference to American Exceptionalism in his address to the nation, that it is extremely dangerous to promote the people to see themselves as being exceptional for whatever reason. All countries are a work in progress and all are different from one another, and to put that idea of Exceptionalism into their heads threatens international cohesiveness. If the United States is exceptional then we can go ahead and surpass entities like the U.N. if we feel the need to spread democracy and police the world without the permission of other countries and their consent. If we go over the head of the U.N. and other international bodies then we take away the legitimacy and leverage
that those entities have to maintain international stability, which is the main reason why
the League of Nations failed: lack of real leverage (Putin, 2013). Although other
countries view American Exceptionalism as a negative aspect of the United States’
culture, many of our own citizens still believe and even promote American
Exceptionalism.

President Obama, in his address to a graduating class at the U.S. Military
Academy, has been cited as saying that he believed in American Exceptionalism with
every fiber of his being (Jaffe, 2015). If you show an inkling of doubt in your country,
your loyalty is doubted, so imagine what would happen if a public figure like the
president disagreed publicly with American Exceptionalism. When New York Mayor
Guliani thought Obama was criticizing the United States, he stated that he did not
believe that the president loved the United States, and that he did not love the
American people. Mayor Guliani stated that he based his statement on the opinion that
Obama was not brought up through love of this country; he later revised his
statement and said he was not questioning his patriotism, but his faith in American
Exceptionalism (Blow, 2015).

Other politicians have embraced American Exceptionalism head-on. Marco Rubio
even made ‘Exceptionalism’ the core topic of his 2010 campaign for the senate, Newt
Gingrich has titled one of his books, A Nation Like No Other: Why American
Exceptionalism Matters, and Mitt Romney’s proposed foreign policy has often centered
around American Exceptionalism (Ceaser, 2012). With politicians bombarding the
general population with the glamorization of American Exceptionalism, it is no wonder why some people blindly believe in it.

I believe that Anne Marie Slaughter, a former senior State Department official in the Obama administration, said it best, “When American history is told by the winners, by white people who were in charge, it looks one way. When American history is told by people who are every bit as patriotic, but who saw a different side, of course it is going to change” (Jaffe, 2015, para.10). American Exceptionalism, in the modern world, is a concept that has been formed on the traditions of an ancient belief of white Christian supremacy that has been transformed into a means of expressing pride for the United States. The flaw here though is that Americans can still be proud of their country and of its many achievements, but that does not mean that Americans have to think their country is better than all others. It is possible to acknowledge your own shortcomings instead of puffing your chest to prove your dominance over others.
2. Research Design and Methods

2.1 Methodology

American Exceptionalism can be analyzed in a multitude of ways; this research draws on a multi-dimensional methodology to obtain a more well-rounded view of the questions presented earlier. The President of the United States of America gives an annual address, the State of the Union, where he or she updates the country on the condition of the United States and the new bills or programs the given president wants to introduce in the coming year or term. I have collected and examined these State of the Union speeches from 1965 to 2016 (n=52) as my dataset because of their regularity; every President must give one, with generally the same sorts of content, eliminating variability in the content of speeches given year to year.

This research will be utilizing a mixed methodological approach to investigate my hypotheses. This thesis will use qualitative methods of analyzing the data, incorporating the Constant Comparative Method and the Long Table Method. As for the quantitative investigation of the data, the means of different groups will be compared to explore the hypotheses. The data were obtained from an online database that has transcribed every American State of the Union Address since the county’s inception (Woolley & Peters, 2016).
2.2 Procedure for Quantitative Methods

Quantitative analyses, also known as content analyses, have a goal for a numerically based summary of the chosen dataset and is neither a fully-detailed description nor a complete impression of the data (Neuendorf, 2002, p.14); because of this implication, this thesis will utilize both quantitative and qualitative methods. The role of this content analysis will be to work to summarize rather than report every detail concerning the dataset (Neuendorf, 2002, p:15). For the content analysis, I read through each State of the Union Address from 1965 to 2016 in their entirety and coded for statements of uniqueness, superiority based on social identity theory, and a miscellaneous category for all other American Exceptionalism statements that did not fit into the previous two categories. Next, I counted how many statements were made per year and calculated a total.

For Hypothesis One I coded the years 1965-1975 and 2004-2016 as group one, periods of time during a military failure, and all other years, 1976-2003 were group two. 1965 was chosen as the start year because it was the first official year that the United States was at war with Vietnam. Although the Iraq War began in 2003, the State of Union Address in 2004 was the first Address given while at war with Iraq. For Hypothesis Two, Republican presidents were group one and Democratic presidents were group two. The first group for Hypothesis Three were the years 1965 to 1975 (Vietnam War), 1990-1991 (Persian Gulf War), and 2001-2016 (Afghanistan War and Iraq War) representing periods of time of war. Group two for Hypothesis Three were the years

To quantitatively test the hypothesis, independent samples t-tests were run to compare the means of the different groups established by the hypotheses. The hypotheses were tested using the statistical software SPSS.

**2.3 Procedure for Qualitative Methods**

Qualitative methods are used to capture narratives. In a world where data can be intricate, complicated, and have multi-directional realities (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994), it is important to understand and explore the data in multiple facets. Neuendorf (2002, p:14) expresses that qualitative research is highly useful because it is capable of being a valid source of ‘deep’ information within the text of a dataset. For the qualitative portion of this thesis I identified emerging themes within the data set, relative to each category that was coded (uniqueness, superiority [social identity theory] and miscellaneous), to see if there were any apparent patterns (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). This research utilized two different methods, the Constant Comparative Method and the Long Table Method, within the qualitative portion of this thesis.

The Constant Comparative Method includes inductively categorizing and coding data while simultaneously comparing all of the units of meaning (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 126). As the State of the Union Addresses were read, statements were selected and categorized. If a category did not fit for the statement then a new category would be created. The Long Table Method is simply utilizing a long table to
pour over the selected data. After coding the data and categorizing it, I printed out each statement and laid them physically on a long table to examine if there were any salient themes occurring.

State of the Union Addresses from the year 1965 until 2016 were coded for statements describing themes of American Exceptionalism. The data were coded in three categories that encompass American exceptionalism themes. The first was uniqueness, or Gilmore’s (2014) categorization of singularity. The second was based on Gilmore’s (2014) superiority characteristic. This thesis’s version of superiority has categorized statements specifically based on a facet of social identity theory: building the in-group up while putting the out-group down. Finally, the last category will be a miscellaneous category for all other aspects of American Exceptionalism, including statements referencing religiosity, that do not fit in the categories of uniqueness or social identity theory.

Statements of uniqueness included examples such as, “The moment has arrived to harness the vast energies and abundance of this land to the creation of a new American experience, an experience richer and deeper and more truly a reflection of the goodness and grace of the human spirit” (Nixon, 1970). The rules I established for inclusion within this category were that the statements had to use the word unique specifically in describing the United States or showing a difference from all other countries. Statements depicting representation of social identity theory included expressions like, “Then, because of America's overwhelming military and economic
strength, because of the weakness of other major free world powers and the inability of scores of newly independent countries to defend, or even govern, themselves, America had to assume the major burden for the defense of freedom in the world." The rules for inclusion in the social identity theory category were showing a sense of bolstering American group Identity while distancing from the ‘other’, categorizing people into groups, and statements that were over-exaggerations of uniqueness (Not just that the United States is unique, but there is a direct comparison between the United States and another country.). Statements that are coded under the miscellaneous category include proclamations such as, “Listen to President Thomas Jefferson in 1802: We act not "for ourselves alone, but for the whole human race." And, “because we as Americans have the capacity now, as we've had it in the past, to do whatever needs to be done to preserve this last and greatest bastion of freedom." The rules for inclusion established for this last group of miscellaneous statements included sentiments of greatness and God’s destiny for the United States related to American Exceptionalism.
3. Analysis

3.1 Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis was used to see if there was a numerical significance to the hypotheses tested. To recap, SPSS was used to run multiple independent samples t-tests to compare means of the different categories specific to each hypothesis.

3.1.1 Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis was that United States Presidents would use statements of American Exceptionalism less during times of failed military intervention, i.e. the Vietnam War and the Iraq War eras, than during times in the absence of failure in their State of the Union Addresses. This research compared two means, the means of the number of times statements of American Exceptionalism were used during periods of failed military intervention compared to other years from 1975 to 2003. Meaning a two-tailed one-sampled t-test with an alpha level of .05 was used to compare the means between two groups.

During this statistical test, group one represented periods of time of failed military intervention (1965-1975, 2004-2016, N=24) and group two represented periods of time of the absence of failed military intervention (1976-2003, N=28). The mean for amount of American exceptionalism statements for group one was 3.83 and the mean for group two was 3.79. To declare a significant result, the significance number would
need to be below .05. When the data were ran a significance number of .94 was computed, being extremely far away from the critical value of less than .05. Therefore, the results for hypothesis one were not significant; we can see that statements of American Exceptionalism were used fairly equally during times of failed military intervention and in the absence of failed military intervention through the years of examination. Below are the tables from SPSS for hypothesis one.

*Table 1: Group Stats H1*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis 1</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total failure</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>2.514</td>
<td>.513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AF</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>2.043</td>
<td>.386</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: T-test H1*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>.886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td>.074</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: T-test H1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>Mean Difference</td>
<td>Std. Error Difference</td>
<td>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>.940</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>.632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td>.941</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>.642</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1.2 Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis inquired if Republican presidents would use statements of American Exceptionalism more frequently than Democratic presidents would in their State of the Union Addresses, not restricted to specific years or conditions. This hypothesis required an independent t-test as well because it was comparing the means between Democrats and Republicans.

In the independent samples t-test Republicans were assigned as group one and Democrats group two. The mean number of use of American exceptionalistic statements for group one was 4.43 and the mean for group two was 3.08. It was concluded that hypothesis two had a significance level of .03, yielding a significant finding that Republicans do use American Exceptionalism statements significantly more often than Democratic presidents do during their annual State of the Union Addresses. Below are the SPSS tables for hypothesis two.
Table 4: Group Stats H2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis 2_repvsdems</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Rep</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>2.456</td>
<td>.464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dem</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.767</td>
<td>.361</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: T-test H2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene's Test for Equality of</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variances</td>
<td>Means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>3.998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: T-test H2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.1.3 Hypothesis 3

The last hypothesis predicted that statements of American Exceptionalism would increase during times of war, regardless of being failures or successes, than during times of peace. This research required an independent samples t–test as well because it looked at a comparison between two means: time periods of war and time periods of peace. Times of war was assigned as group one and times of peace was assigned as group two.

In the statistical analysis, group one had a mean of 4.11 uses of American Exceptionalism per State of the Union Address. Group two had a mean use of 3.46. This yielded a significance level of .3, concluding a non-significant relationship between the two groups; there is no significant difference between the use of American exceptionalistic statements in State of the Union Addresses in times of war and times of peace. Below are the results from SPSS in table format for hypothesis three.

Table 7: Group Stats H3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis 3</th>
<th>War</th>
<th>Peace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>2.439</td>
<td>2.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Error Mean</td>
<td>.461</td>
<td>.408</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8: T-test H3

Independent Samples Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>1.141</td>
<td>.291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: T-test H3

Independent Samples Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>.304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td>.297</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1.4 Descriptive Statistics

Previously American Exceptionalism was shown to be embedded within social identity theory. While coding the 52 State of the Union Addresses (N=52), American exceptionalistic statements were coded. Further, statements that fell within the category of representing aspects of social identity theory, primarily building one’s
in-group up while separating it from the out-group, were coded into a sub-category. This was done in order to later investigate and see how often statements representing social identity theory were used throughout the 52 documents.

After running a descriptive frequency statistic test on American exceptionalistic statements depicting themes of social identity theory, it was found that these statements occurred .42 times every year during the address. Also, this research looked at how often terms of American Exceptionalism in total were used throughout the addresses. On the other hand, terms of American Exceptionalism in total were found to occur 3.81 times per address on average. Below are the descriptive statistics table and the frequency table for the total sample size.

Table 10: Descriptive Stats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>2.250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIT</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.696</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 11: Frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>61.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>82.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>96.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>98.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Qualitative Analysis

As stated previously, this research will utilize the Constant Comparative Method and the Long Table Method to exhaust the narrative of the data to find evidence to answer the three hypotheses.

3.2.1 Hypothesis 1

The first question this research asked was if there were fewer statements of American Exceptionalism used during the Vietnam War and the Iraq War than in years in the absence of military failure. On the contrary, I found that there was often more presidential rhetoric used in a ‘pro’- American Exceptionalism manner. During times of the absence of failure, statements of American Exceptionalism made were less intense
during times of the absence of failure than during the times of failure i.e. the Vietnam War and the Iraq War.

During the absence of failure Clinton (1995) stated that, “This is a very, very great country. And our best days are still to come.” This statement is less powerful than some others in particular when compared to George W. Bush’s (2003) utterance that, “Once again, we are called to defend the safety of our people and the hopes of all mankind.” This dramatizes the notion of greatness; because the United States is exceptional, the fate and safety of the entire world rests in the hands of the United States and it is up to the American people to take on that responsibility. To further compare the two time periods, periods of time where military failure is absent and periods of time following military failure, in 1984 Reagan said, “America has always been greatest when we dared to be great. We can reach for greatness again.” This is kind of a weak statement of exceptionalism, indicating that Americans can be great if they try to be, neglecting the core characteristic of American Exceptionalism: inherency. Bush’s (2006) statement counters the previous one made by Reagan when he paints the United States as a vigilante force, defeating the world’s most horrific evil when he says, “We are the nation that saved liberty in Europe and liberated death camps and helped raise up democracies and faced down an evil empire.”

The addresses made in the absence of military failure were less powerful in a way, possibly due to the fact of feeling secure in the American national identity: not being at war and with no one threatening the United States power. There is safety in
soft statements and in 1983, Reagan (1983) positively commented, “And I may say, Americans have rallied to this cause, provided once again that we are the most generous people on Earth.” Additionally, in 1996 during an absence of failure Clinton (1996) remarked, “Our country is and has always been a great and good nation. But the best is yet to come if we all do our parts.” These statements can bolster or reinforce American Exceptionalism by insinuating that Americans are the most giving people on the planet and that the United States has always been great, but when compared to statements made during times of military failure there is a distinct difference in the tone of intensity.

In 2012 Obama decreed, “America will always win.” Deductive reasoning leads me to surmise that when the United States wins, someone else has to lose. The definitive word ‘always’ shows the confidence in a unique never-failing state. During the Vietnam War Nixon (1970) stated, “Because of the weakness of other major free world powers and the inability of scores of newly independent nations to defend, or even govern, themselves, America had to assume the major burden for the defense of freedom in the world.” In short, the inadequacy of all other countries has led the United States to ‘assume the burden’ to defend freedom throughout the entire world. It is an exuberant declaration on behalf of Nixon to claim that the entire world depends on the United States to procure and defend freedom for every single nation.

Lastly, during the end of the Iraq failure Obama (2016) proclaimed, “The United States of America is the most powerful nation on Earth. Period. Period. It’s not even
close.” He continues, “We spend more on military than the next eight nations combined. Our troops are the finest fighting force in the history of the world. All right. No nation attacks us directly, or our allies, because they know that’s the path to ruin. Surveys show our standing around the world is higher than when I was elected to this office, and when it comes to every important international issue, people of the world do not look to Beijing or Moscow to lead. They call us.” There are some fairly large claims of American exceptionalism within this quote. I argue that they are the most intense of all the statements found within the dataset. Within this statement President Obama asserts uniqueness and dominance over other countries by naming the United States the most powerful country, with the best army on Earth. Simultaneously he exudes a prime example of social identity theory, building up the in-group’s, Americans, self esteem while distancing the out-group, non-Americans. President Obama goes on to call out other countries and state that when the world needs a leader they do not look to anyone other than the United States.

3.2.2 Hypotheses 2 and 3

The second inquiry this thesis asked was if Republican candidates would use American Exceptionalism rhetoric more often in their State of the Union Addresses. Even though this is a primarily mathematical question of counting the number of statements and examining if the difference is significant, I noticed that Democrats and Republicans made statements of equal intensity, but over time the intensity of statements increased. Mathematically, this research will address which party,
Democratic or Republican, had more statements including American Exceptionalism rhetoric in a later part of this thesis.

The last question this research investigated was if American Exceptionalism statements would increase during times of war versus times of peace. Numerically there were no significant differences in usage of American Exceptionalism statements between times of war and times of peace. I found that there was, as stated before, the theme of increased intensity over time. This paper will present the most intense, passionate, and greatest statement containing American Exceptionalism of their given presidency within the selected speeches to illustrate the increase in intensity over time.

The first president of the selected time period, 1965 to present day, was President Johnson. This research begins in 1965 because that is the first year of official war in Vietnam and this is important because Vietnam is the first widely recognized United States war failure. His most Exceptional statement was, “We will stay because in Asia and around the world are countries whose independence rests, in large measure, on confidence in America’s word and in America’s protection” (1966). Although boasting of United States greatness, it is only being said to justify occupancy in places around the world.

The second president examined is President Nixon. He communicated to the nation, “Then, because of America’s overwhelming military and economic strength, because of the weaknesses of other major free world powers and the inability of scores of newly independent nations to defend, or even govern, themselves, America had to
assume the major burden for the defense of freedom in the world.” (1970). This statement is a step up in intensity from the last, showing that not only do we occupy other countries because they depend on us, but because we are economically and militarily superior to everyone else. This quote additionally shows that because the people of the world are incapable of taking care of themselves the United States has to do it for them. This is how Americans justify actions, like invading Vietnam, when there are immoral aspects of those actions. The damage the United States caused to the people of Vietnam and their own veterans was a large cost to pay to defend freedom.

Next, President Ford’s most intense and dramatic statement was in 1976. He proclaimed, “One peak stands highest in the ranges of human history. One example shines forth of a people uniting to produce abundance and to share the good life fairly with freedom. One union holds out the promise of justice and opportunity for every citizen: That union is the United States.” (1976). This statement is once again in line with American Exceptionalism values: uniqueness and superiority in being the ‘highest peak’ in all the world’s history of being a good country. I consider this statement to be of the same caliber as Nixon’s most potent statement, maintaining a homeostatic level of American Exceptionalism between the transition of the presidency.

President Carter had the least amount of statements of American Exceptionalism rhetoric out of all of the presidents included within the dataset. Carter affirmed, “Our country has regained its special place of leadership in the worldwide struggle for human rights. And that is a commitment that we must keep at home, as well as abroad” (1979).
Here President Carter uses words like special place and leadership to show an inherent and unique standing in the world. It is the United States duty to be a leading force in determining the world's future when he states that the U.S. should be leaders not only at home, but also throughout the world. Once again Carter remained at about the same level of intensity as the last two presidents who preceded him.

In 1984 President Reagan had two statements of American Exceptionalism that were of virtually the same level of intensity and drama. He claimed, “And we can be proud to say: we are the first; we are the best; and we are so because we’re free” (1984). This is a prime example of the inherent greatness bestowed upon the United States solely for being the first true democracy and really no other reason at all.

Secondly, in the same address he stated, “How can we not believe in the greatness of America? How can we not do what is right and needed to preserve this last best hope of man on Earth?” (1984). This goes back to President Lincoln’s quote where he says that the United States is the last hope on Earth for success (Lincoln, 1862). Reagan asks the people how they could not believe in greatness because it is essentially the last hope, but the United States is the last hope because it is great; creating a cyclical train of thought. These quotations were selected because they are straightforward expressions of American Exceptionalism, he comes right out and says it word for word in the last quote. There is not much beating around the proverbial bush within these statements, Reagan comes out and says straightforwardly that the U.S. is the greatest, how could you disagree?
George H. W. Bush proclaimed, “There are those who say that now we can turn away from the world, that we have no special role, no special place. But we are the United States of America, the leader of the West that has become the leader of the world” (1992). Here he denounces the non-believers of American Exceptionalism by saying that if the U.S. is not special then why is the U.S. a world leader? In this statement, inductively, a person of power, arguably the most powerful person on the planet, is telling millions of people that they are the best because of their citizenship. This statement is similar to Reagan’s in that it is straightforward candid; he comes out and says openly that the United States is special and therefore a world leader.

In 1993 President Clinton asserted, “I believe we can do better because we remain the greatest nation on Earth. The world’s strongest economy, the world’s only military superpower” (1993). Now it has become the norm to refer to the United States as the greatest country in the world, not only in greatness alone, but also militarily and economically. Clinton mentions American greatness directly more than seven times throughout his presidency and even quotes de Tocqueville, the man said to be credited with the idea of American Exceptionalism. President Clinton reaffirms the notion of American Exceptionalism set up by previous presidents.

George W. Bush followed with an even more intense example of American Exceptionalism, stating that, “We are the nation that saved liberty in Europe and liberated death camps and helped raise up democracies and faced down an evil empire” when referencing the defeat of the Nazis during World War II (2003). Here President
Bush ignores the valiant efforts of all members of the Allies during World War II and gives all credit to America because of its greatness. Not only are Americans great, but now there is a superhero-like and romanticized quality of the history of American Exceptionalism and all the good it has done. The defeat of Nazi Germany was a huge success of the world and that is just it; it is a success of the world, not solely of the United States. The American people look to the president for guidance and leadership, then they are given a half-truth of history to fortify American self-esteem. The trend then continues with the next residency as Obama takes American Exceptionalism to the next level.

As stated in the last paragraph of the analysis for hypothesis one, President Obama issued the most intense statement of American Exceptionalism within the 52 addresses that were included in the data (Obama, 2016). This statement is included in the most recent State of the Union Address and shows the most intense decree of American Exceptionalism rhetoric.
4. Discussion

4.1 Conclusions

One conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that Republican presidents use American Exceptionalism rhetoric during their State of the Union Speeches more so than Democratic presidents do, which supports Newman and Coe’s (2012) findings. As for the issue of generalizability to all other presidential speeches, Republican presidents may use this type of rhetoric more often in all kinds of speeches as well, but this would require the examination of other types of speeches that presidents give. Although my findings did not detect a decline in the use of American Exceptionalism in presidential speech rhetoric, there is still a decline in American Exceptionalism represented in the Gallup polls and Pew Research polls presented by Tyson (2014) in the general population of the United States. This shows the decline of American Exceptionalism beliefs in the general public across the board, but maybe not at equal rates of decline in United States presidential rhetoric.

There were no significant findings for hypothesis one, the prediction that there would be a decrease in United States presidential rhetoric of American Exceptionalism via State of the Union Addresses, or for hypothesis three, the prediction that there would be an increase in American exceptionalistic rhetoric by United States presidents in their State of the Union Addresses. Due to the fact that this research only examined one type of domestic speech, one cannot definitively conclude that my hypotheses have
been disproven, which will be discussed further later in the future directions section of this thesis.

Although most of my findings were not significant, there is one interesting discovery only detected in the analysis: overtime there is an increase in intensity of American Exceptionalism statements made by U.S. presidents in State of the Union Speeches. There are multiple possible reasons for this, all of course are speculations, but, maybe the increase in intensity is a last attempt to bolster the public’s opinion of themselves in a quick-changing world were other superpowers are making headway. Maybe it is to save face in the wake of the past and current military failures and maybe it is because, as Americans, it is difficult to not be deemed special anymore and by overcompensating with American Exceptionalism is keeps ‘our’ ego and self-esteem in check; with the latter being supported by and being a prime example of social identity theory.

4.2 Weaknesses and Strengths

There is no singularly perfect study that exists in research and this thesis is no exemption to this idea. One of the biggest weaknesses was the sample size. American Exceptionalism dates back much further into the past than 1965, therefore, this research could have missed significant trends in years prior. 1965 was not an arbitrary year to start with. This research began its investigation then because it was the beginning of the Vietnam War, America’s first failed war. Not including the years prior to
1965 may limit the ability to detect significant effects since American Exceptionalism has existed much before the Vietnam War era.

Another weakness could be how detecting American Exceptionalism was operationalized as the coding of statements and rhetoric in State of the Union Addresses. These addresses are only one type of speech that a president gives, there could be significant findings, but there is a need to include different kinds of speeches. An example of this would be how Gilmore (2014) coded presidential speeches in his research that ranged from domestic to international audiences, not all speeches were one specific type of speech. Maybe there are excessive uses of American Exceptionalism rhetoric in this research because the State of the Union Address is primarily for Americans and therefore should typically bolster American Exceptionalism. While in international speeches, the use of American Exceptionalism rhetoric might occur less often in order to not offend other countries. There could be a need for a balance between the different kinds of speeches used.

It was also difficult to measure American Exceptionalism in this research because a portion of this study dealt with the Vietnam War era and specific questionnaires, like Pew Research Polls, on American Exceptionalism did not exist. I could have interviewed people, but it would be in hindsight and would probably not represent an accurate depiction of views that people held forty-some years ago. Speeches were a good choice because they were recorded and are available to go back and reference at any time in the future, but speeches are also a limited resource that do
not allow interaction and are open to interpretation. Gilmore (2012) also brought up an interesting point in noting that the reason that his research did not find a decrease in American exceptionalism rhetoric in the post-Vietnam War era and during the Iraq War is because of the need to save face. Gilmore (2012) says that there can be increases in American Exceptionalism by presidents to restore a broken image after a failure, which is something this research lacked a control for.

Quantitative data is very rigorous, scientific, and in a way cold. It is a very mathematical means of researching, which has many benefits including reliability, reducing personal biases, and having multiple kinds of validity. The issue with quantitative methods, especially when using language as a dataset, is that you can miss the intensity of the message within the data. An intense comment is still given the same numerical value as a seemingly weaker statement without a real way to differentiate. On the other hand, qualitative data allows for the exposition of the rich and full narrative being expressed in the language of the data using inductive logic (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The weaknesses with qualitative methods are that personal biases can often times be unconscious and difficult to suppress during a ‘neutral’ analysis. Qualitative research is often subjective and can be misinterpreted, and it is difficult to generalize when there is a lot of detail in a relatively small sample size; when data can be converted into mathematical expression that then can be extrapolated and generalized much more easily.
Lastly, there were some weaknesses with the hypotheses themselves.

Hypothesis One divided the sample into two groups: time periods where American Exceptionalism was used in times of war failure and the times in the absence of war failure. The issue here is that the second group (absence of failure) included times where the United States was at peace, but also times when the United States was at war in general i.e. the 1991 Gulf War. This could affect the results for not controlling or eliminating the years where the United States had successful wars or in armed conflicts.

Hypothesis Two, the prediction that Republicans would use American Exceptionalism rhetoric more than Democratic presidents in general, was based solely on State of the Union Addresses. If other speeches were included, maybe the results would be different. Also, one cannot say that because this research found that Republican presidents used American Exceptionalism terms more so than Democratic presidents that this would hold true throughout all American presidents, i.e. 1789-1964.

Hypothesis Three predicted that American Exceptionalism rhetoric would be used more during times of war than during times of peace. The weakness with hypothesis three is that the Cold War occurred throughout a large portion of the years that were coded for in the dataset. There were two reasons why this research did not include the Cold War during the ‘times of war’ group: one was that the conflict was never armed and was without physical intervention (The closest being the Bay of Pigs), and the second was because it would limit the sample size of group two, times of peace,
down to less than ten. Therefore, I ultimately decided to code the Cold War era as a time of peace.

Although there were weaknesses within the current study there were undeniably also some strengths. One of the strengths of the dataset that I selected, State of the Union Addresses, have a good reliability because of the regularity in their content. Furthermore, presidential speeches are a great way to measure American Exceptionalism. Social identity theory explains why American Exceptionalism rhetoric resonates with the American public; it bolsters in-group self-esteem. Since the president represents the country and since the State of the Union is a significant annual event, it is an excellent venue to examine how the country sees itself vis-à-vis other countries. Finally, the use of the mixed methodological approach allowed for more encompassing and comprehensive conclusions to be explored and drawn.

**4.3 Lessons learned**

Overall, American Exceptionalism is still and will continue to be a hot topic for debate. Yes, it can promote group unity, a sense of national identity, and a feeling of being a ‘true American’, but it also can produce bigotry, racism, and arrogance that have the potential to create negative consequences globally, therefore affecting our country’s relationship with other countries. It is my belief that American Exceptionalism can do more harm than good. Take for example the Vietnam War: The United States went into Vietnam wearing the proverbial white hat under the premise of American greatness when South Vietnam called for help. The major upset about the United States
involvement in Vietnam was that it was not the United States war to fight; it was more of a preventative measure to avert the domino effect of communism throughout Asia. The United States began its occupancy in Vietnam and engaged in brutal hand-to-hand combat in arguably the most violent American war in history, creating an, arguably, uncalled for and devastating loss of life.

I believe that it is also important to acknowledge that as a country we are in a constant state of war, the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf, the War on Terror in Afghanistan, and the Iraq War, not to mention all the conflicts that never made it to the ‘war’ status in between all of these wars, span over approximately a century, with small intermittent periods of peace in between. In short, we are afraid of peace. As Americans we are told that our country is confronted by constant risk of attacks whether it be, “threats to the nation’s cybersecurity, aggression by Russia, rising violent extremism and an evolving danger posed by the catchall menace of ‘terrorism’” (Daddis, 2015). Due to these threats, it is easy to go to war, there is comfort in familiar things and unfortunately we are very familiar with war. Often times we associate the United States superiority and military superiority, which explains why American Exceptionalism enables military interventions (Daddis, 2015).

It is important to take a step back and gain perspective on who we, as Americans, are as a people, do we really want peace or have we come to a point where we cannot live without war? Daddis (2015, p.51) says, “In a deep sense, we are afraid of no longer bring the indispensable nation.” He calls this paranoid patriotism. In other
words, we are afraid of not having American Exceptionalism. Daddis (2015) also brings up a great warning to heed, not to let our ignorance of the Islamic State drive us into yet another Middle East intervention. It is important, not only in relation to the Middle East, but to all other parts of the world, to apply this lesson to all other countries we interact with. Do not let our ignorance and our sense of American superiority propel us into further conflict. It is important to be able to look within to think about who we, as Americans, want to be as a cohesive people.

Social identity theory has told us that in order to enhance our own self-esteem we distance ourselves from the other, and arguably vilify them instead of taking the time to learn about them. The ignorance in pre-judgment and prejudice, that often times occurs while distancing the in-group from the out-group, allows for terminal conflict between countries. The United States has distanced itself from others and has used American Exceptionalism to help bolster in-group self-esteem. If Americans took the time to acknowledge and learn about the other out-groups, maybe Americans would not be afraid of peace and would be willing to acknowledge their own shortcomings as a country, effectively critically analyzing and critiquing the use of American Exceptionalism.

4.4 Future Directions

Future research should take advantage of the current state the United States is in as we move towards the end of a failed war. At this point research can benefit from surveys, questionnaires, and interviews to investigate people’s opinions and possible
shifts of American Exceptionalism in the wake of failure. This will help to clarify if there is an effect of military failure on American Exceptionalism and how it fluctuates.

Along the lines of this current research, future studies should look at more diverse presidential speeches, not only State of the Union Addresses, but domestic, international, formal, and informal speeches throughout a presidential term. It could also be beneficial to see how American Exceptionalism has changed throughout time. For this, future research could look at presidential speeches starting with George Washington and testing to see past patterns of American Exceptionalism to better predict how it can change in the future. Another future direction would be to investigate the detection of increase in intensity of statements over time that was found in this thesis. Why is this trend seen and why does it contradict the Gallup Polls?

The United States became a world power after winning the Spanish-American War, therefore it could be beneficial for future research to incorporate this time period as well. Another recommendation I have is to look at the effects of presidents before 1965 as well. By incorporating these other presidents like Eisenhower, Kennedy, and others, the research would become more well rounded and better informed. Also, it could be beneficial to look at the effects of American Exceptionalism on foreign policy. This was examined by Gilmore (2014) through presidential speeches and he calls for further research needed on the issue to explore how other countries are affected by the United States use of American Exceptionalism and the role of this concept in political discourse in politics. I recommend, because Gilmore’s research solely focused on
presidential speeches, that further research done on American Exceptionalism’s effect on foreign policy also incorporate other data from other officials who have direct impact on foreign policy, including the U.S. Secretary of State, foreign policy makers, and other public officials. Gilmore (2014, p. 2433) wrote that there is importance in understanding “the impacts that his potentially continuous and ubiquitous American idea can have on the sometimes-strenuous relationship the United States has with the rest of the world.”

Outside of scientific research, where can the United States go from here? The first step is admitting that we may not be the best country now, in the past, or ever. We can aim for a future without American Exceptionalism, but what would that look like? Would it look like a broken Germany after World War II when the nationalistic Nazi party failed or would it look like a successful country that was respected by others? Domestically, would America be a more inclusive country, not thinking one sub-group is better than the other? Would our foreign policy become more geared to negotiations and more nonviolent tactics, rather than military intervention? There is really no way to know since the United States has only ever known Exceptionalism. The United States was founded on it, but it does not hurt to begin to think and question this line of thought.

As for now, we can educate the people. In school, students can be provided textbooks that are not skewed to favor the United States, always painting it as the ‘good guy’. We can learn how to think critically on our own, not to buy into the prejudices instilled from birth. We can question where our beliefs come from, free of the fear of
being deemed a ‘traitor’ or un-American for it. I suggest more research into American
Exceptionalism and countries who have announced that they are done with
Exceptionalism, like Great Britain (Cohen, 2011). Look to countries like this to see the
repercussions of a changing national identity and how to smooth the transition.

If I were asked the same question again, why do United States citizens think they
and their country are the best, I would say that I do not believe that the United States is
the best. I understand where that feeling of Exceptionalism comes from, but I do not
understand why people still believe in the outdated concept based on white Christian
supremacy that ventured over from Europe at the United States inception. It is time to
think critically for oneself and realize that Americans can all still love the United States
and be proud of who they are as a people, while simultaneously allowing themselves to
acknowledge their wrongdoings and admit that they are not, and will not, always be the
best at everything. We, as Americans, are far from perfect and it is important to strive to
better ourselves, but not at the cost of ignorance, bigotry, and belittling others.
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