

## **The cultural roots of isolationism and internationalism in American foreign policy**

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This article examines the question: why have Americans supported both internationalist and isolationist foreign policies at various points in history? It argues that part of the answer to this question can be found in the structure and nature of American political culture. American political culture frames the terms in which the programmes and plans debated by political leaders ‘make sense’ to the ordinary people whose consent is fundamental to the making of a democratic foreign policy. The article offers an account of the central components of American political culture that are shown to frame four core cultural orientations towards foreign affairs: Liberal Internationalism, America-as-Model, Nativism and Triumphalism. Two dimensions, Liberal Internationalism and America-as-Model, are illustrated through a discussion of contemporary arguments in favour of and opposed to the 1848 Mexican–American War. The article then offers suggestions of how the four categories of American foreign policy orientations can be applied in cases beyond the Mexican–American conflict. Both isolationism and internationalism are shown to be core components of American political culture. They are, as a consequence, eternal features of American foreign policy.

**Keywords:** isolationism; internationalism; American political culture; Mexican–American War

### **Introduction**

This article examines the question: why have Americans supported both internationalist and isolationist foreign policies at various points in history? Why do they agree to send their troops to war (or not), to allow their money to be used to subsidise foreign nations (or not), or to intervene as foreign peoples face immeasurable suffering (or not)? Part of the answer to this question can be found in the structure and nature of American political culture. American culture contains an array of values, ideals, rituals, norms, goals and expectations that ground democratic political debate. This cultural mix provides the working material with which numerous policy alternatives can be offered to the American people for consideration. In other words, American political culture frames the terms in which the programmes and plans debated by political leaders ‘make sense’ to the people whose consent is fundamental to the making of a democratic foreign policy. Internationalism may be favoured at any given moment, and indeed with the emergence of the United States as a global economic and military hegemon over the last 60 years, internationalism is the default position of American foreign policy today. However, there is no cultural reason why the United States need be

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internationalist; internationalism is but one of a set of possible constructions of the content of American political culture. Leaders mix circumstances with culture to appeal for support for specific programmes. New leaders and new circumstances can make new policy out of pre-existing cultural materials. American foreign policy is, like all policies, political: it is subject to change as circumstances, leadership, and culture allow.

### **The persistence of isolationism and internationalism in American foreign policy**

Conventional narratives of the history of American foreign policy hold that the United States practised a relatively isolationist foreign policy for much of its history.<sup>1</sup> The term ‘isolationism’ was used to describe the United States’ practice of avoiding transatlantic, reciprocal defence treaties of the kind that propelled much of Europe into World War I. While in practice the United States grew powerful enough to engage in global power politics by the end of the nineteenth century, it generally chose to focus on internal continental expansion and its own economic development instead. When the United States intervened in global politics, as it did during the First World War, it quickly pulled its forces and its power back as soon as it achieved its immediate goals. Exceptions to this pattern existed – the United States engaged in an explicitly colonial war in 1898 in which it gained control of the Caribbean and the Philippines, for example – but the conventional narrative of American foreign policy history holds that these were internationalist exceptions to an otherwise isolationist approach to global affairs. American foreign policy from 1787 to approximately 1940 is generally seen to have been ‘isolationist’ because the nation had not engaged in transatlantic, European-style power politics.

Then, sometime during World War II, the United States is held to have changed its basic orientation to foreign affairs. Chastened by its unpreparedness to fight Germany and Japan, and fearful of the growing power of the Soviet Union, the post-war United States is said to have changed course and reoriented its foreign policy to one of international leadership and permanent global engagement. The nation now worked to create transatlantic and international military alliances it had previously avoided. It also sought to develop an integrated global economy that linked previously warring nations to each other and to the United States. It further guaranteed the international security of its coalition partners by maintaining large numbers of troops overseas as barriers to the expansion of opposing powers. This, in turn, allowed those partner nations to invest in economic recovery and social support programmes at home. After World War II, the United States is said to have become a fully internationalist country.

Notably, the conventional narrative that the United States was ‘isolationist’ in its foreign policy before World War II emerged as the nation faced the prospect of global engagement and leadership after the war ended. Political leaders seeking to justify new internationalist commitments, and scholars seeking to explain the causes of the war, hit on the idea that American ‘isolationism’ before World War II had prevented the United States from building up its enormous, if latent, power to prevent conflicts from arising. Isolationist sentiments were also seen to have made it impossible for the United States to mobilise its forces quickly when war broke out. Had the United States been sufficiently powerful in 1936, these leaders suggested, it could have deterred or rapidly defeated German and Japanese aggression.

Additionally, in controlling German and Japanese ambitions American power would also have changed the conditions that led to the emergence of the Soviet Union as a global, existential threat. Had World War II not occurred, the argument went, the Soviet Union would not have become the international power it was at the end of the war. Appeasement it was argued emerged from isolationism and was therefore responsible for the horrors of World War II. It was also seen to have set up the subsequent US–Soviet conflict, the Cold War.

This conventional account of the United States as an once isolationist nation that slowly turned internationalist is simplistic, however. Americans were substantially less isolationist in their earliest days than the conventional narrative admits, for example. In the years after achieving its independence, the nation rapidly built a vast merchant fleet that engaged in global trade, particularly profiting during the extended war between Britain and France in the Napoleonic era. These activities led the young nation into repeated conflicts with both Britain in France as well as with pirates in Tripoli, on the coast of North Africa. These conflicts led to the creation of the US Navy, a navy that was ultimately deployed to destroy the threats to American commerce posed by the Tripolitan pirates and that was able to defeat several British naval vessels in armed combat during the War of 1812. Similarly, in its early, comparatively powerless days, the United States issued the unenforceable Monroe Doctrine forbidding European colonial powers to expand their domains in the Western hemisphere. Additionally, under US and international law trans-Mississippi Native American tribes were considered independent nations; accordingly, in theory at least the United States' aggressive expansion across the North American continent was, fundamentally, an internationalist foreign policy although it was not, a trans-Atlantic one. Thus it may be seen that in contrast with the conventional narrative, the United States in fact did have an active international presence throughout the years of its supposed isolationism.

The 'America was isolationist but then became internationalist' narrative is further complicated by at least one additional fact: despite claims that isolationism has been supplanted by internationalism, isolationism as a force to be reckoned with has not disappeared from American political life. For example, after nearly 60 years of American internationalism – a period in which the United States has signed an array of global mutual defence treaties, has deployed and used its military forces around the world, has promoted international trade and encouraged the notion of a global free market that is at the rhetorical core, if not always the actual practice, of contemporary globalisation – isolationism continues to resonate with many Americans. It emerged as a central feature of the 2008 presidential campaign of Texas Congressman Ron Paul, for example. Likewise, many human rights and other activists opposed to US international interventions essentially rely on isolationist sentiments when they argue that whatever American policymakers say about their right and obligation to promote democracy and human rights around the world, US actions actually lead the nation to commit many crimes against humanity. Consequently, they insist that US isolationism is to be preferred to US interventionism justified as internationalism. Events such as the Iraq War and the recent global economic crisis have led many Americans to sense that international engagement may be more harmful than isolationism. Most recently, isolationist sentiments have found fresh expression in US law as part of the 2009 economic stimulus package passed shortly after President Obama came to office the law contains various 'Buy

American' provisions that signal a possible uncoupling of American economic life from the free trade ideals that have generally shaped, albeit imperfectly, the nation's post-World War II policies. Isolationism simply has not gone away in American political discourse.

### **A cultural frame for understanding isolationism and internationalism in American foreign policy**

Anything that persists must have an explanation. Here, that explanation is examined from a cultural standpoint: namely, the terms in which American political culture frames political and social life in the United States. The analysis of American political culture offered here focuses on two core features of political life that are generally accepted, at least in the nation's public rhetoric, and can be shown to have a significant effect on the country's foreign policy, particularly the issues of internationalism and isolationism. These key features are Lockean Liberalism and American Exceptionalism.

Liberal political values lie at the heart of American political culture. Citizens of the United States tend to share liberal political values such as individualism, personal enterprise and what Isaiah Berlin termed 'negative liberty': the right to be free from government actions and government authority in all but the most extraordinary of circumstances. Americans insist that concepts such as freedom, liberty, equality (at least of opportunity and of rights), tolerance (especially religious), diversity (especially ethnic), and capitalism and free enterprise are at the core of their political identities.<sup>2</sup> Indeed these beliefs are held so passionately, at least rhetorically, that some scholars insist they constitute an American civic religion, one that is an ideological-yet-inclusive agent of national identity that promoting the integration of persons of diverse religious, political, social, ethnic, and racial and class backgrounds into one national whole.<sup>3</sup>

Yet as Louis Hartz and other scholars have noted, this dogmatic liberalism does not guarantee that American politics will express itself in tolerant, democratic, and rights-protecting practices. Instead, the liberal consensus engenders and incubates a paranoid, dark side in which any challenge can be seen as a threat to liberty itself. Precisely because Americans agree closely on the core values of political life they lack experience in dealing with dissent, challenge, and fundamental political-cultural disagreements about the right ordering of society. They have never had to learn to accommodate the ideas, interests and values of people who have different world views. Thus the American liberal consensus is reflexive, and prone to periods of paranoia, tension and fear, especially when confronted by an apparently alien 'other' representing what seems to Americans to be ideas that reject the universal and obvious truths of the American political consensus. In short, the American liberal consensus can generate periods of intolerant fear mongering and demagoguery.<sup>4</sup>

There is more to American political culture than liberalism and illiberalism, however. It is also exceptionalist. Exceptionalism refers, at least in part to many Americans' belief that the United States is a special place and Americans are a special people. This sentiment is as old as the American colonies themselves. The United States was – and is – seen as a unique place free from the stains and evils of the Old World, and thus blessed with the opportunity to create a world of freedom, liberty and justice without its motives, and goals being damaged by the corruption of

its immediate peers, the European colonial powers. Freed from the sinfulness of the European nations, America could in the eyes of its founders be a force for good in world affairs.

Notably, nothing in the concept of exceptionalism promotes any specific foreign policy orientation or programme at a particular point in time. Originally, and at many times since, the notion that the United States had a special role to play in the world has been used as a justification for staying at home and keeping out of world affairs. As the concept's originator, Jonathan Winthrop, put it in his sermon, 'A Model of Christian Charity', America was 'as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us'.<sup>5</sup> His Puritan colony would not force its values on the world; instead, it would lead by example. To be exceptional in this sense, then, was to stay at home and show the rest of the world how to live in a New World.

Yet exceptionalist rhetoric has also been used to promote active internationalism. World War I was explained to the American people as the 'War To End All Wars' and World War II was framed as a 'Crusade for Democracy'. Similar language supported American internationalism in the Cold War, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the Persian Gulf War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. America was the 'essential nation' without which the great goods of human liberty and freedom would, to adopt Lincoln's words in the Gettysburg Address, 'perish from the Earth'.

Taken together, liberalism (and its illiberal doppelgänger) and exceptionalism frame much of American political culture. They contain many common terms of reference, symbol, ritual and ideology within which different groups and individuals compete and press their claims for power, policy and identity. Such terms are found, among other places, in public documents, speeches and campaigns, and in the political symbolism employed by people as they promote their agendas. Out of the clamour has emerged a shared discourse through which different groups and individuals press for their goals, define meaning and create rules and standards of political conduct in ways that make sense to partisans of a particular dispute even when such groups and individuals profoundly disagree about the meaning of the terms, symbols, rituals and practices themselves.<sup>6</sup>

When combined with liberalism's two sides, the interventionist and non-interventionist dimensions of exceptionalism suggest that there are four default cultural orientations to foreign policy in America (Figure 1). Mode refers to the way in which Americans express their sense of exceptionalism in foreign affairs – e.g. whether exceptionalist values frame internationalist or isolationist policies. Mood refers to which version of liberalism dominates at any particular political moment – the sense of America as a tolerant and rights-protecting regime, or its illiberal, paranoid opposite.

*Liberal internationalism* embodies engagement in world affairs via an array of economic, social and military alliances. Liberal internationalists are, as a whole, confident that American public ideals and values are worth promoting and that the United States can best protect or advance these ideals through active participation in world politics. While advocates of liberal internationalism may support wars and other acts of violence as a means to achieve American goals, they are also likely to support other, less coercive tools of foreign policy-making. Such persons manifest the optimistic dimension of liberalism as well as the interventionist strand of exceptionalism.

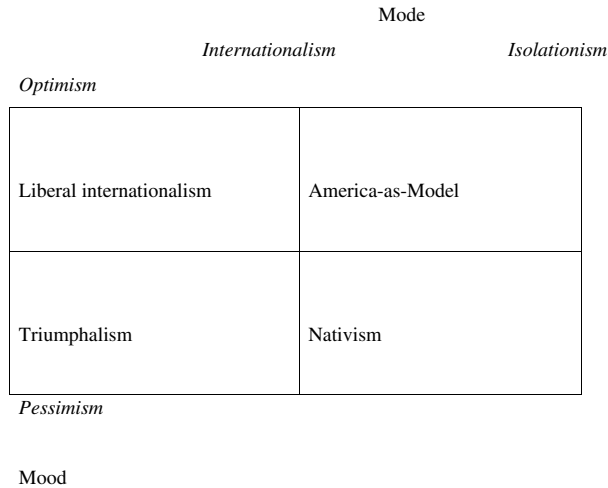


Figure 1. Mode and mood in American foreign policy.

Those who see *America-as-Model* may also be confident that American ideals and values are worth promoting and supporting but believe that playing an active role in world affairs is more likely to undermine American goals than achieve them. Accordingly, such persons generally oppose military interventions overseas except in cases of direct attack, and in general prefer that the nation not enter into entangling treaty commitments. Economic policies are likewise inward looking. Indeed, in some cases those who adopt this cultural frame advocate the abrogation of existing treaties and alliances in order to disentangle American ideals from global politics.

*Nativism* describes the foreign policy orientation of those Americans who are not confident in the strength of their liberal ideas, and who also believe that the nation cannot secure American liberties by engaging with the wider world. Their perceptions thus combine the illiberal dimension of liberalism with the exceptionalist sense that America can remain a special place only if it avoids foreign entanglements. Such people promote a very inward looking foreign policy. Indeed they are quite hostile to perceived foreign threats or pressures. Alternatively, nativists oppose existing, internationalist policies and insist that internationalist cultural and political elites are betraying the future of the United States to some foreign cause. Like those who support the idea of America as a model to others, advocates of this cultural position argue that America needs to keep to itself if it is to achieve its goals.

Like advocates of liberal internationalism, *triumphalists* insist that America's destiny can be secured only through active engagement with the world at large. Like nativists, however, triumphalists insist that American political ideals are threatened from numerous malign sources. Accordingly, triumphalists support aggressive engagement in world affairs to defend or promote their understanding of American interests and values. US policies must aggressively promote US interests, including cultural interests, and should not rely on alliances or moderate means to secure these goals.

The four mindsets described in are, of course, ideal types. The real story of the cultural politics that underlie any era's foreign policy practices is more complex than any graphic can capture. Moreover, as is clear from the brief description of the

structure of American political culture offered here, all four strains of American political culture exist simultaneously. One or other might be dominant at any particular moment, but features of each constantly flow in the political lifeblood of the United States. The framing of the cultural context of American foreign policy presented in offers a way of understanding the relationship among and between the values of American political culture and the nation's foreign policy, and of our discussion of isolationism and internationalism.

### **Culture, American foreign policy and the Mexican–American War**

To offer a brief case study that might avoid – or at least elide – contemporary controversies, consider the cultural politics that framed the United States' first aggressive, internationalist foray into global politics: the Mexican–American War of 1848. Several features make this an appropriate focus for case study. The war was both the United States' first international war and its first war of choice. It occurred not because it had to or because it was forced upon the United States but because the nation – both its leaders and its citizens – chose to fight it. By pre-emptively annexing a former Mexican territory, that Mexico did not recognise as independent (Texas), the United States self-consciously thrust itself into international conflict. In addition, the Mexican–American War represented a dramatic change in US foreign policy. Texas had sought to join the United States in 1836, but the request was rejected; in the intervening years a relative peace emerged and a pattern of benign Mexican neglect of their continuing claims to Texas had become the norm. What had therefore been an isolationist foreign policy on behalf of the United States before 1848 became internationalist, at least briefly.

Moreover, there is also no credible reason to suppose that as Americans contemplated the question of going to war with Mexico they had a detailed understanding of the United States' relations with its southern neighbour, the nature of Mexican domestic politics, or the complex history of American settlement of what was the Mexican state of Texas. Any public debate about the war, then, would necessarily be conducted in the abstract. Such conditions seem likely to emphasise rhetorical and cultural appeals.

Finally, the Mexican–American War provides evidence of the crucial role that leaders play in shaping political discourse and gaining support for policies, whether domestic or international. It was the political elite who mobilised support, defined the arguments, and structured appeals for public support. Much of this work was accomplished rhetorically in speeches, newspapers, and political tracts. Different leaders offered competing cultural narratives of the imperative for war with Mexico – or of the evils any such war would bring the nation.

The debates and arguments that preceded the United States' decision to enter into war with Mexico offered two competing visions about how the nation ought to develop in order to ensure its culture, identity and place in the world. In one, the United States had natural geographic and cultural limits that could not be violated without risking the life of the nation itself – even if it was the destiny of the country to take dominion over the whole continent this spread could occur only slowly so as to ensure like-minded people were integrated into the United States, not cultural 'others' who might threaten the survival of the American experiment. In the other vision, the United States' moral status as the font of liberty and freedom would

create an empire of freedom on a continental scale, especially when combined with the natural industriousness of its people and the power of their ideals. Each vision reflects a contextualised version of two of the core American political cultural orientations to foreign policy – liberal internationalism, in the case of the interventionists, and America-as-model, in the case of the opposition to the Mexican war.

### *America-as-model and opposition to the Mexican–American War*

Collectively, the arguments of those opposed to American continental expansionism – or at least expansionism through war – offered a vision of a republican America linked by limited borders, a commitment to principles such as the rule of law, and a shared religious heritage. Representing an eclectic mix of ideas, partisan alliances and regional points of view, those who opposed war with Mexico had a shared understanding of the natural geographic borders and cultural identities of the American people, and so argued against military action against Mexico throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Their arguments successfully dominated American political life until the mid-1840s, and taken together, they constitute an argument if not for pure isolationism, then for cultural conservatism and resistance to aggressive expansionism. Put simply, they offer an account based on the notion of America as a model to others.

Thomas Jefferson's former Treasury Secretary, the 87-year-old Albert Gallatin, made a clear statement of the notion of America as a model to others as he considered the United States' westward expansion. In Gallatin's words,

Your mission is, to improve the state of the world, to be the 'Model Republic', to show that men are capable of governing themselves, and that this simple and natural form of government is that also which confers most happiness on all, is productive of the greatest of the intellectual faculties, above all, that which is attended with the highest standard of private and political virtue and morality.<sup>7</sup>

Aggressive warmongering, especially with the intent of shifting from 'Model Republic' to agent of liberty, would ultimately undermine the virtue it claimed to advance.

Others concluded that the goals expressed by the pro-war forces and the means they used to achieve them presented a tangible threat to the constitutional foundations they claimed to be advancing. Congressman Raynes, a Whig from North Carolina, expressed these sentiments in a speech before the House of Representatives in 1845:

Our foreign relations present a no less gloomy prospect. The proposed annexation of Texas, upon mere party grounds, and in a shape utterly at variance with the forms of the Constitution, is well calculated to alarm every friend of this country, not only because it shows an utter disregard of that sacred charter of our liberties, but because it threatens us with the horrors of war, which might be avoided by a little temperate delay and dispassionate negotiation . . .

Let us reflect, that we still have a Constitution which we inherited as an invaluable birthright from our fathers, and which we are bound to transmit to our posterity.<sup>8</sup>

The *Tribune*, edited by abolitionist leader Horace Greeley, argued that the creation and maintenance of a standing army – especially an army big enough to



deal with the many Native American tribes that would be brought into the United States through a successful war with Mexico – was a ‘relic of barbarism’. Yet such an army would be necessary because the newly acquired territories were filled with hostile groups that would ‘hover round our new empire like the Goths ... upon aggressive Rome’. Another writer commented, ‘It is historically true that the entrance upon a career of conquest has ever marked the declining node of every republic which has ventured upon the hazardous and ruinous path’. The end point of such decline would be a ‘blighting simoom of corruption, injustice, usurpation, selfishness and fanaticism’ – the end of democracy itself.<sup>9</sup>

The cumulative effect of these varied political arguments and concerns was to urge caution, if not exactly isolationism, in US dealings with its contiguous neighbours. Notably, such sentiments drove US policy for much of the period leading up to war and to some extent beyond: the United States refused to support Texas in its war for independence in 1836, and even as late as 1844 the US Senate refused by a vote of 16–35 to support a treaty offering annexation. Similarly, in 1847 the United States chose negotiation rather than war with Great Britain over Oregon; for all the intensity of the ‘Fifty-Four Forty or Fight!’ campaign, in which many Americans had insisted that the border between the Oregon Territory and western Canada needed to be fixed hundreds of miles to the north of its current location or else the United States should declare war on Great Britain, only 14 US Senators voted to undertake a third British war. In 1848 only 11 US Senators supported the expropriation of more land from Mexico beyond that which was negotiated in the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo that ended the Mexican–American War. And the 1845 annexation treaty that finally precipitated the Mexican–American War by offering Texas entry into the United States only passed the US Senate by two votes in 1846.<sup>10</sup> For many political leaders and social actors during the years prior to the Mexican–American War, protecting and supporting American democracy, liberty and freedom meant avoiding undue expansion, not promoting it – a position some of them maintained even in the immediate aftermath of a successful war.

### ***Manifest destiny and ‘liberal’ internationalism***

Those who advocated war with Mexico offered an array of arguments, many of which can be seen as precursors to Wilsonian internationalism. American universalist values seemed to compel expansionist ambitions that, due to the military and economic capacities of the United States and the blessing of divine forces, would lead to the inevitable spread of the United States to its natural continental borders.

The familiar notion of Manifest Destiny was at the heart of these arguments. Newspaper editor John L. O’Sullivan first coined the term in 1845, but the core of the sentiment is much older. O’Sullivan wrote that the United States had a ‘manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions’.<sup>11</sup> As early as 1818, however, then Secretary of State John Quincy Adams had insisted on ‘our natural dominion in North America’ while plotting US strategy for negotiations with Great Britain; this, he later explained, included all Spanish territories on the southern border of the United States and all British territories to its north.<sup>12</sup> James Buchanan offered a similar vision in 1844:

Providence has given to the American people a great and glorious mission to perform of extending the blessings of Christianity and of civil and religious liberty over the whole North American continent. . . . This will be a glorious spectacle to behold. . . . This spirit cannot be repressed. . . . We must fulfill our destiny.<sup>13</sup>

The American sense of Manifest Destiny was multi-dimensional. Part of it was economic and in this vision, the United States was filled with productive and energetic people who spread opportunity and creativity wherever they went. As explained in an 1845 *New York Morning News* editorial, for example, Americans were a beneficent force for economic development and social change:

Public sentiment with us repudiates possession without use, and this sentiment is gradually acquiring the force of established public law . . . [I]t will come to pass that the confederated democracies of the Anglo American race will give this great continent as an inheritance to man. Rapacity and spoliation cannot be features of this magnificent enterprise, not perhaps, because we are above and beyond the influence of such views, but because circumstances do not admit their operation. We take from no man; the reverse rather – we give to man . . . With the valleys of the Rocky Mountains converted into pastures and sheep-folds, we may with propriety turn to the world and ask, whom have we injured?<sup>14</sup>

Or, as seen by New York Senator Daniel S. Dickinson in 1848, just as the war with Mexico was winding down,

the tide of emigration and the course of empire have since been westward. Cities and towns have sprung up upon the shores of the Pacific. . . . Nor have we yet fulfilled the destiny allotted to us. New territory is spread out for us to subdue and fertilize. . . . North America. . . . is soon to become the commercial center of the world.<sup>15</sup>

American dominion over the continent was to be about more than developing its economic value. Economic and political values were tightly linked in the American experience. Economic development was understood to be a form of political and social development, all leading inexorably to human freedom. Americans had an obligation to secure both their own liberty and make it possible for others to live free under an American sky. Americans were, in other words, to make Americans of everyone. As one *New York Herald* editorialist put it in 1845:

The minds of men have been awakened to a clear conviction of the destiny of this great nation of freemen. No longer bounded by those limits which nature had in the eye of those of little faith [in] the last generation, assigned to the dominion of republicanism and this continent, the pioneers of Anglo-Saxon civilization and Anglo-Saxon free institutions, now seek distant territories, stretching even to the shores of the Pacific; and the arms of the republic, it is clear to all men of sober discernment, must soon embrace the whole hemisphere, from the icy wilderness of the North to the most prolific regions of the smiling and prolific South.<sup>16</sup>

Essayist M.C.M. Hammond put it this way:

Will she extend the beneficence to other peoples, – in other climes and other countries, live over her own days of glorious achievement and enjoyment, in stimulating and witnessing their development? Will she grasp what Providence apparently places within her reach, to redound to the ultimate benefit of the species? or, closing her hands in

mock humility, and pursuing the avocations of avarice, will she remain supinely content amid the general yet tedious progress of the mass of mankind? Time will speak for her!<sup>17</sup>

In December 1848 President Polk argued that 'our beloved country presents a sublime moral spectacle to the world', and that Americans were 'the most favored people on the face of the earth'.<sup>18</sup>

Such rhetoric could (and did) mask self-interest, racism and other ills of course. What matters here, however, is that such ideals were central to the public debate about whether to go to war with Mexico. In other words, even if policy-makers were entirely cynical in their ambitions, it does not follow that ordinary citizens who rallied to support the war felt themselves motivated by greed or the realities of geopolitics. Instead, their support rested on the resonance between the stories they were told and the experiences and values they brought to the moment. The rhetoric of America's manifest destiny made war with Mexico as much obligation as opportunity, as much responsibility as right. The linking of this vision of a continental nation with the moral and political obligation to expand freedom across the land enhanced claims that only the oceans that surrounded the hemisphere's landmasses limited the natural borders of the United States.

### *Cultural choice and war with Mexico*

The debates surrounding the outbreak of war with Mexico collectively offered two competing visions of the proper scope, aim and role of the United States. Each was grounded on differing interpretations of the applied meaning of the values, norms, goals, rituals and claims of American political culture. For expansionists, the universal demands of liberty compelled the nation to move out to its fullest extent to make it possible for all others to enjoy the blessings of American life. For their opponents, the dubious means used to start the war, combined with the equally suspect goals of the expansionists, reinforced an older, limited view and understanding of what the United States should do and why it should do it. Each side claimed that its vision was the true path that would properly fulfil American destiny, and each was advanced by an array of political and other leaders for public debate. There were, undoubtedly, numerous private and less public agendas embedded in the debates about war with Mexico, but in the main the arguments offered by each side were the ones through which public support for the war was won or lost.

In the end it was no contest: the expansionists won, and Americans rallied in great numbers to support the war. Various military units were overwhelmed with volunteers, even in states that had generally opposed the war; citizens offered financial support to soldiers who had yet to muster in and start drawing pay for their service; new patriotic rituals were formed, including the practice of having troops rally under a shared national flag while assembling before local, cheering crowds. This energy was mirrored by the speed and completeness of the American victory in the war itself. The notion of using American power as a tool of liberal internationalism became deeply embedded in the wider American consciousness.

## Conclusion

While it is beyond the scope of this article to examine additional cases, it should be noted that at various points in US history American foreign policies have been informed by each of the four categories captured in Figure 1. Periods of mass immigration have seen the emergence of nativist parties and policies, and contemporary concerns about illegal immigration draw on this strain of American cultural life. The Cold War and America's War on Terror have combined the allure of liberal internationalism with the fear mongering of triumphalism to shape American policy and American politics. The particular plans and programmes advocated at any given time inevitably reflected the unique politics of the moment, but each reflected the core principles in which American politics is enculturated.

The fact that American foreign policy has been both relatively isolationist and relatively internationalist over time, and the fact that these modes are embedded in American political culture, should give pause to any analyst who insists that isolationism, however conceived, is a relic of an American past never to be resurrected. American political life embodies both isolationist and internationalist precepts, and even at its most internationalist many Americans have resisted and resented the United States' active engagement in world affairs. Entrepreneurial leaders had to link political context to cultural variables to make the Mexican–American War make sense to the American people, for example; in our own time, it took leadership to turn Iraq into an evident threat that required – at least in terms of the Bush administration's rhetoric – invasion and occupation.

What one set of leaders make in one context can be unmade by other leaders in another. The notion of the United States pulling back from the world and living in quiet isolation is, of course, improbable, but the United States has never acted in an entirely isolationist way at any point in its history – even during its supposedly isolationist periods. Rather than expecting a new era of American isolationism to reject global engagement, then, it makes more sense to imagine an America less engaged, less interested in global free markets or using its military forces to achieve its ends. The global economic downturn of 2007–2008 and beyond offers perhaps a first test case of any incipient turn: Americans might well decide that it makes little sense for them to pay a premium for European security, much less the Global War on Terror, while forgoing national health care and running up endless national debt, for example. Such changed policies could be legitimated easily by appeals to notions of America-as-Model or even Nativism. It does not follow that Americans *will* make these choices, of course, but fertile cultural grounds exist in which such policies might take root.

The political and cultural roots of American foreign policy place an important framework around the policies made by the United States. They shape and delimit the range of actions available to American policymakers even as they provide the ideas, values, tools and rituals through which particular policies can be advanced or challenged. Both isolationism and internationalism are core components of American political culture. They are, as a consequence, eternal features of American foreign policy.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the Eccles Centre of the British Library and the Illinois State University donor who supported my research and made this project possible.

## Notes

1. This summary emerges from several sources. Compare Charles O. Lerche, Jr., *Foreign Policy of the American People* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1958), especially 117–76; Robin Higham, ed., *Intervention or Abstention: The Dilemma of American Foreign Policy* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975), 1–20; and Walter Johnson, *The Battle Against Isolation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944).
2. The following discussion rests on a number of works. See, for fuller discussion, John Kenneth White, *The Values Divide: American Politics and Culture in Transition* (New York: Chatham House, 2003); John W. Kingdon, *America the Unusual* (New York: Worth, 1999); Daniel Judah Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); Daniel Judah Elazar, *The American Mosaic: The Impact of Space, Time, and Culture on American Politics* (Boulder: Westview, 1994); Richard Ellis, *American Political Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955); Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage, 1974); Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1981); Seymour Martin Lipset, 'American Exceptionalism Reaffirmed', in *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism*, ed. B. Shafer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1–45; Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962); Aaron Wildavsky, *The Rise of Radical Egalitarianism* (Washington, DC: American University Press, 1991). See also David Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Norton, 1996); Charles Lockhart, *The Roots of American Exceptionalism: Institutions, Culture and Politics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998); and Trevor B. McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: U.S. Foreign Policy since 1974* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).
3. Compare Sidney E. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975); Robert N. Bellah et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).
4. Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*.
5. Hanover Historical Texts Project, John Winthrop: *A Modell of Christian Charity*, (1630). Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston, 1838), 3rd series 7:31–48. <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>, accessed January 26, 2011.
6. Marc Howard Ross, 'Culture and Identity in Comparative Political Analysis', in *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure*, ed. Mark I. Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42–80.
7. Robert W. Johansen, *To the Halls of Montezuma: The Mexican War in American Imagination* (New York: Oxford, 1985), 286.
8. 'Speeches of Mr. K. Raynes, of North Carolina' (Washington, DC: J. and G.S. Gideon, 1845), 5–6.
9. Johansen, *Halls*, 284.
10. Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), ix–x.
11. Merk, *Manifest*, ix.
12. *Ibid.*, 16–17.
13. Stephen John Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent and the Cultural Fictions of Antebellum America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 93.
14. Merk, *Manifest*, 25.
15. *Ibid.*, 29.
16. *Ibid.*, 46.

17. Johansen, *Halls*, 311–12.

18. *Ibid.*, 311.

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