

The Intersection of American Exceptionalism and Protestant Christianity: Distinction, Special  
Status, and Mission in the Early Republic

by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

American exceptionalism formed out of and alongside Protestant Christianity in the early republic. Protestants created a nexus of symbols, rhetoric, and themes within their religious dialogue that facilitated the ideological development of American exceptionalism. Foundational to both Protestant Christian discourse and exceptionalist perception was a belief in group distinction, the special status, or chosenness of people and place, and mission-oriented motivation. This research draws parallels between religious thinkers including John Winthrop, Jonathan Edwards, Timothy Dwight IV, Lyman Beecher, Horace Bushnell, and Charles Grandison Finney, alongside influential politicians, authors, and journalists such as Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, David Humphreys, Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, Charles Levin Lewis, and George Bancroft. The language used by these Protestant leaders and secular, political actors during the late-eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries reveals the rhetorical, symbolic, and thematic intersection between Protestant Christianity and American exceptionalism.

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## INTRODUCTION

The ideas and beliefs people maintain about themselves can motivate, and even explain, their actions in the world. Like individuals, nations develop their own unique identities. Those mythic identities are often shaped by a long historical memory. Often nations form their collective beliefs concerning themselves drawing on years of shared experiences in a defined place. Anglo-Americans in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were denied this sort of national mythmaking predicated on extended memory. The United States had only recently arrived on the scene of nations and its colonial roots did not extend beyond a mere two hundred years. The identity the citizens of the United States would eventually forge would have to be rooted in something other than their past. What the Americans did have available to them was their unique present condition and a hopeful *future*.

Americans during the revolution thought of themselves as different from the rest of the western world. In many ways they were right. Not only were they a new nation, but they were exceedingly diverse, highly literate, and profoundly concerned with rights, freedoms, and individual liberties.<sup>1</sup> It was not mere difference that inspired American identity formation, but something more. Americans in the early republic began to see themselves as *exceptional*. What many Americans came to believe was that their novel national project was special. They were far removed from most of the problems that plagued the Europeans. They had no monarch to lord over them, no state religion coercing their worship, population and land crises were unimaginable, and no rigid feudal system determining one's economic destiny. Opportunity abounded and increased prosperity was achievable, if not inevitable. These features of the

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<sup>1</sup> Bailyn, Bernard. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution: Fifteenth Anniversary Edition*. (London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017).

American experience among others caused many to invest in the emergent narrative of American exceptionalism.

Studying American exceptionalism as a historical phenomenon is complex, not least because the idea is still prevalent today. Many Americans hold tightly to the belief that there is something truly special about their country that makes it unique and privileged among the other nations. The idea has had enough saliency in recent years that it has been used by American politicians to shape domestic policy at home and justify foreign policy goals abroad.<sup>2</sup> American exceptionalism is not a relic of a bygone era, but a living idea, which makes examining it in its historical context a challenge. Further complicating the matter is the divisiveness of the concept. For some, American exceptionalism is a proud part of their patriotic heritage. It is a firm belief in American progress and a faith in the national project. For others, it is a problematic byproduct of nationalism gone too far. It made way for the exploitation of certain groups and opens the door to international conflict. Whether exceptionalism is a positive or negative part of our national identity is not of concern here. Nor is the question of the reality of American exceptionalism. Sociologists and political scientists have debated the extent to which America is or is not exceptional on the world stage. Historians may be able to contribute to those debates, but that is not the goal of this project. Instead, the focus of this work will be on the origins, expression, and development of the idea overtime.

Defining American exceptionalism can be tricky. Again, it is important to separate historical exceptionalism from the present form, though the idea is largely stable over time. These three core features of American exceptionalism, belief in distinction, special status, and

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<sup>2</sup> Koh, Harold Hongju. "On American Exceptionalism." *Stanford Law Review* 55, no. 5 (2003): 1479–1527. Reflects on American exceptionalism in the wake of 9/11 and its impacts on public policy.

national mission are central to the concept's definition. First, America was *distinct* from the rest of the world. In the early republic this specifically meant the Atlantic World. The American project was unlike the European monarchies with their conflict and tyrannical rulers. Distinction went beyond the systemic. It was also thought of in terms of the other peoples of the Atlantic World, particularly in relationship to questions of ethnic diversity and racial contrast. These pre-conditions established the foundation that exceptionalism is built on, namely a firm belief in American superiority, or *special status* on the world stage. Not only did those who subscribed to exceptionalism believe America and its people were unique, but they believed they were privileged over others. The Natives who lived to the West were seen as backwards and savage. The Europeans were oppressed by authoritarians and constantly in conflict with one another. It is from this belief that the third and final feature of exceptionalism emerged. Exceptionalism prompted people to see themselves on a *national mission*. It was their duty to spread Americanness in order to better the world around them. In a sense, these Americans saw themselves as called to action.

It is important to note that exceptionalism, like all cultural myths, particularly those about identity, was not held universally. These ideas are typically only shared by a subset of the broader population. As it relates to the origins and early expressions of American exceptionalism, what is clear is that this idea had distinct saliency within the Anglo-American, Protestant community. People outside of that specific intellectual, cultural, and racial sphere were less likely to relate to the core themes that shaped this form of national identity.

Exploring the core elements of American exceptionalism individually and collectively reveals a deep seeded intersection between exceptionalism and religion in the early republic. Throughout the past, religion has played a profound role in national identity formation. Nations

did not form exclusively within geographical boundaries, but ideological ones as well, which often included religious parameters. Protestantism was a potent cultural force through the colonial period and into the formative years of the new country. Much has been made about the role religion has played in the history of early America. From the settling at Plymouth to the Great Awakenings that swept across the countryside, the pre-colonial context that the emerging nation grew out of was decidedly shaped by Protestant Christianity. Often cited as one of the earliest examples of American exceptionalism, perhaps proto-American exceptionalism is more appropriate, is John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity." Winthrop's sermon was delivered enroute to Massachusetts Bay colony in 1630.<sup>3</sup> In the sermon, he spoke of a Christian ethic modeled on love and charity. The Puritan's covenantal relationship with God required them to live out this ethic and in as far as they did so successfully, they would be like a "city on a hill," an example to the world. The Puritan colonists saw themselves in a special relationship with God and they were on a mission to fulfill their covenantal responsibilities.

Religion played a powerful role across colonial America. New England was the home of many of British North America's leading clergymen. In the New England colonies Puritanism was deeply influential within culture and politics. Throughout the Middle colonies and the South, Protestant Christianity was equally important to their respective regions. Quakers immigrated to Pennsylvania as a part of William Penn's colonial experiment. Gentry Anglicans and the growing Baptist church in the South found themselves in conflict on the doorsteps of the Revolution. On the frontier, Protestants were evangelizing to the Natives and revivals engaged with a westward moving population. As America moved towards its national divorce with England, Protestantism was a prevailing social force across the Thirteen Colonies. It is out of this

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<sup>3</sup> Winthrop, John. "A Model of Christian Charity - 1630." *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*. (Boston, MA: 1838).



context that late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Protestant Christianity found itself intersecting with the development of American exceptionalism.

Christianity is a big tent religion, and early America was a big tent nation. Calvinist Puritans, liberal Unitarians, progressive Quakers, high church Anglicans, revolutionary Baptists, Roman Catholics, Joseph Smith's Mormons, and many others all contributed to transformations in early American Christian thought. All these denominations and sects employed the language of exceptionalism and contributed to the weaving together of religion and national mythmaking. Given that early America was markedly Protestant in its early years, this project will largely focus on those forms of Christianity. A wide range of Protestant traditions and denominations will be examined closely, namely Puritans, Unitarians, Presbyterians, and liberal revivalists on the frontier. This will be done with a particular eye towards the leading spokesmen for their respective movement at relative times. While Roman Catholicism as an intellectual force in shaping American exceptionalism remains outside of the scope of this project, it will ultimately feature in discussions on Protestant-Catholic relations, anti-immigration politics, and Catholic discrimination in early America.

American Protestant Christianity and American exceptionalism share an intellectual, thematic, and rhetorical link. It is there where religion and national identity intersect in the formative years of the American experiment. American exceptionalism was deeply influenced by American Protestant Christianity's theological interest in themes of distinctness, chosenness, and mission. The religious climate of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in America was dynamic. New denominations were wrestling with older, traditional ones. Doctrines evolved and novel movements sprung into existence. A persistent thread through the religious dynamism of early American Protestantism was a concern with questions of soteriology, covenantal

boundaries, and most importantly, millennialism. It was Protestant Christians in the early republic who were first wrestling with soteriological questions pertaining to who was and was not saved. They attempted to understand their role and expectations within the covenantal agreement between themselves and God that they saw themselves a part of. Equally challenging for Protestants was understanding the millennium they anticipated. How and when would it be inaugurated, and what role might people play in ushering in the kingdom of God? The emergent themes that developed from within American Protestant Christianity coincide with the development of American exceptionalism as an idea. American exceptionalism was expressed through the language of and motivated by the worldview of American Protestantism. The two concepts are inseparable.

Religious leaders, public-minds, and politicians from the country's founding through the Antebellum period embraced American exceptionalism rife with Protestant symbolism and thematic overlap. Some of the earliest and most pronounced expressions of American exceptionalism were made by Protestant Christian theologians. Among the best examples of this are Timothy Dwight's "Ode to Columbia," a patriotic poem composed at the beginning of the War for Independence and, over sixty years later, Horace Bushnell's 1837 Phi Beta Kappa address.<sup>4</sup>

From the Revolution to the era of westward expansion, secular Americans drew upon American exceptionalism in their public discourse. Their ideas were bound up with religious symbolism, and embodied questions of American distinctiveness, unique status, and national calling. These themes are embedded in the rhetoric of revolutionaries like Thomas Paine, who

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<sup>4</sup> Dwight IV, Timothy. "Ode to Columbia." 1777. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N20523.0001.001/1:1?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>, Bushnell, Horace. "The True Wealth or Weal of Nations." Yale University, 1837 .In Clark Northrup, William Lane, and John Schwab. *Representative Phi Beta Kappa Orations*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915.

despite not being American himself, was the first to popularize American distinction and national mission in *Common Sense* in 1776. Years later, expansionist themes such as John O'Sullivan's manifest destiny would inspire mass migration west in the name of fulfilling a divine national calling to bridge the Atlantic and Pacific.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, nineteenth century social reformers and activists would push for a wide range of social reforms including national education, temperance, utopian movements, and abolition. What these revolutionaries, expansionists, and activists all share is their tendency to employ exceptionalist rhetoric that is woven together with religious symbolism and that mirrors Protestant Christian themes of distinctness, special status, and mission.

American exceptionalism would eventually move beyond the boundaries of religious and secular intellectual discourse and invade the political sphere. The Founding Fathers mobilized a nation with their rhetoric and shaped the fate of the United States through public policy. Motivated to spread the reach of the empire of liberty, Thomas Jefferson and his acolytes were the first to mainstream American exceptionalism to the political sphere. That paradigm was absorbed by the expansionists, including Andrew Jackson and James Polk, seeking to acquire more territory, and spread American ideals westward, in spite of the Native peoples living there and growing concerns of the expansion of slavery. With new territory came division. A young Illinois congressman, Abraham Lincoln, utilized religious language and exceptionalism to condemn mob violence as the nation was facing a mounting crisis over slavery. Know Nothings used exceptionalism to draw distinctions between American born Protestants and Catholic

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, Collected and Edited by Moncure Daniel Conway New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1894. Vol. 1., O'Sullivan, John. "Annexation," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, Volume 17. New York: 1845., O'Sullivan, John. "The Great Nation of Futurity," *The United States Democratic Review*, Volume 6, Issue 23. New York: 1839.

immigrants. Horace Mann evoked religious and exceptional rhetoric to advance educational reform. During the early republic, political actors echoed the same themes found in the thinkers and religious tracks. America was *distinct*. America was in some sense *privileged* and equally *called* to a mission.

American Protestant Christianity and American exceptionalism are topics that have a long historiographic and scholarly tradition as individual concepts, but their link has yet to be fully examined. Research in these areas has gone beyond the domain of history. Sociologists have long been interested in Christian religion and American national identity. They often consider questions of ontological exceptionality and the social impact of religion.<sup>6</sup> Though historians have taken similar approaches to these topics, it is beyond the scope of this project to determine whether America is in fact truly exceptional. Instead, this research is concerned primarily with the evolution of ideas in relationship to one another and how American exceptionalism became embedded in the American psyche.

Much has been said about the role of Christianity in shaping the early nation. Perry Miller, an American intellectual historian whose major work centered on Puritans in New England played a prominent role in linking religious ideas to the settlement of early America. Miller's *The Life of the Mind in America* recognizes that religion was one of the key strands in shaping early American identity.<sup>7</sup> Alan Heimert's *Religion and the American Mind* built on Miller's work draws explicit connections between New England Calvinists and the ideology that sparked the American Revolution, again demonstrating the centrality of religion in the

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<sup>6</sup> Lipset, Seymour M. *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Miller, Perry. "Errand Into the Wilderness." *The William and Mary Quarterly*. 10, no. 1 (1953): 4-32. and Miller, Perry. *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War*. (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1965).

development of American intellectual history.<sup>8</sup> Miller and Heimert's religio-centric approach fell out of favor in light of Bernard Bailyn's *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, which instead claimed that radical Whig opposition politics was the primary intellectual current driving the American revolutionaries. Picking up on that religious thread on into the Antebellum period, Whitney Cross' whose intellectual and social history examines the Burned-Over District in New York in the nineteenth century and Ronald G. Walters *American Reformers* which explores revival movements during the same period.<sup>9</sup> A common thread running through much of this work is the concept of millennialism, which was examined closely by Ernest Tuveson in *Redeemer Nation*.<sup>10</sup> While these works together begin to touch on questions of national identity, they have left space for exploring the connection between Protestant themes and American exceptionalism.

Furthermore, intellectual historians of American religion offer valuable methodological tools for examining questions of religion, politics, and national identity. In "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution.", Harry Stout made a compelling case for the usefulness of Heimert's historical method.<sup>11</sup> He argued that there was a strong rhetorical connection between revivalists and those engaged in the later rebellion against England that combined religious and political ideas together in that period. Later, Grant Brodrecht's *Our Country* took a similar approach as he examined how northern evangelical beliefs shaped how many in the North saw the Civil War and how evangelicalism intersected

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<sup>8</sup> Heimert, Alan. *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1966).

<sup>9</sup> Cross, Whitney. *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850*. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1950). Walter, Ronald G. *American Reformers*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Tuveson, Ernest. *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role*. (Chicago, Il: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

<sup>11</sup> Stout, Harry S. "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1977): 519-41.

with the politics of the war.<sup>12</sup> These intersectional approaches tying religious ideas to political perceptions can help reveal the link between American exceptionalism and Protestant Christianity. Exceptionalists throughout the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries drew on innately religious ideas and language to express their beliefs about the identity of the nation and shape the politics of the country.

In the same vein, American exceptionalism has also been examined by scholars from different angles. Deborah Madsen's *American Exceptionalism* is a cultural history that describes the religious origin of American exceptionalism and the process of secularization that it undergoes to enable America's imperial goals. Beyond examining the idea of exceptionalism, she also considers counter-exceptionalist beliefs by people marginalized by American imperialism.<sup>13</sup> Other have taken an approach that focuses on the relationship between American exceptionalism and specific periods in American history. John Murrin explored exceptionalism through the Jeffersonian era and Andrew Lang has done the same through the lens of the Civil War.<sup>14</sup> Most scholars, including Madsen, Murrin, and Lang, agree that there is a deep connection between Christian thought and American exceptionalism, though there is some debate as to the extent of this correlation. James Ceaser, for example, argues that far too much emphasis has been placed on the Puritan Protestantism and the origins of exceptionalism. Instead, he argues that the traditional sources that are used to connect Puritanism and American exceptionalism are spuriously linked. Rather than evolving out of Puritan thought, he argues liberal Protestantism is

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<sup>12</sup> Brodrecht, Grant. *Our Country: Northern Evangelicals and the Union during the Civil War Era*. (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Madsen, Deborah L. *American Exceptionalism*. (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> Lang, Andrew F. *A Contest of Civilizations: Exposing the Crisis of American Exceptionalism in the Civil War Era*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021). and Murrin, John M. "The Jeffersonian Triumph and American Exceptionalism." *Journal of the Early Republic* 20, no. 1, 2000.

more responsible for exceptionalism's development, while still remaining skeptical of the ideological influence of religion more generally.<sup>15</sup>

This research builds on the tradition that emphasizes the role of Protestant Christianity in influencing American exceptionalism. The project will consider a range of traditions from Puritan tradition to the liberal Protestant traditions, and beyond. Protestants from a wide variety of theological and geographical backgrounds actively contributed to the rise of American exceptionalism. To best demonstrate this link, I take a personal and periodical approach examining intellectuals, churchmen, social figures, and politicians within various epochs in the early republic from the early formation of the republic to the period of Manifest Destiny, though to the doorstep of the Civil War.

The first chapter focuses on the theological and intellectual context of American Protestantism across the country from the colonial period through the antebellum period. The chapter is divided into two sections. The opening section is dedicated to examining early expressions of Protestantism with a particular focus on the Great Awakening and religio-intellectual climate of revolutionary America. Debates surrounding revivalism, human salvation, the nature of God, and covenantal theology opened the door for new forms of Protestant thought. Moving into the early republican period, millennialism, will be examined as the key Protestant idea in promoting social reform and encouraging westward expansion. The second section will examine the weight of those ideas with a particular focus on the works of Lyman Beecher, Charles Grandison Finney, and Horace Bushnell.

The second chapter investigates American exceptionalism beyond the religious sphere into the secular and political domains. The three sections in this chapter are thematic and

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<sup>15</sup> Ceaser, James W. "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism." *American Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (2012): 3-28.

chronological. Section one concentrates on the earliest years of the American experiment in the wake of 1776. The revolutionaries and republicans who built the nation also established the context within which exceptionalism originated. The following section focuses on the pursuit of manifest destiny and the expansion on the United States and its people into the West. The chapter closes with an examination of nineteenth century social reformers, activists, and academics who pushed for a wide range of social reforms including national education, nativism, and abolition. A brief epilogue concludes the project with some discussion of the challenges of exceptionalism and Protestantism in light of the Civil War.

Taken together, the religious leaders, public thinkers, and statesmen of the late-eighteenth and-early nineteenth centuries expose just how American exceptionalism developed and the role religion played in shaping it. They reveal the Protestant Christian origins of exceptionalism's core themes. The national intellectual climate advanced by debates regarding American Christian dogma was primed to focus on questions of distinctness, privilege, and mission. These themes were used to create a national mythology that dramatically shaped the formative years of the country. At this thematic, rhetorical, and ideological level, American Protestant Christianity and American exceptionalism intersected.



## CHAPTER I: PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY AND EXCEPTIONALISM

Religion was a vital part of early American identity. It has been debated to what extent America was ever truly a Christian nation, but it is undoubtedly the case that religion played some role in shaping the development of the American republic. Literacy rates in America were high and familiarity with the Bible and religious tracts was commonplace. Christian language and themes were shared across diverse regional communities and ideas could be expressed effectively through religious symbolism. A predominately Protestant populace engaged with ideas that would have cultural value throughout the developing nation. Those very ideas that shaped Protestant movements across the country in the early republic would also come to shape American national identity by promoting notions of American exceptionalism. Not only did Protestantism directly shape the ideas at the heart of an emergent exceptionalism, but it also aided in generating a way of effective communication of those intersecting ideas. Protestantism as a cultural force played a major role in the creation of one of America's earliest imagined communities built on perceived and pursued exceptionalism.<sup>1</sup>

A look at a range of Protestant thought leaders across place and time demonstrates the extensive reach of particular ideas and the cultural influence they had across the growing republic. Puritans, Unitarians, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Liberals wrestled with the nature of God, soteriology, inclusivity and exclusivity, and debates over revivalism in the colonial and revolutionary period. Colonial religious commentators from John Winthrop, Jonathan Edwards, and Timothy Dwight began forging a thoroughly Americanized Protestantism overtime.

In the wake of the Revolution as the country was experimenting with its new republican principles, millennialism would influence theological and social debates between Protestants.

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (New York, NY: Verso Publishing, 2016).

Leading Antebellum Protestants including Lyman Beecher, Horace Bushnell, and Charles Grandison Finney wove exceptionalism into their religious discourse on social reform and millennialism. Those motivated by millennialism would fight for social reform in hope of bringing it about. A byproduct of this fusion of ideas was that others were cast as outsiders, predominately Catholic immigrants. They were victims of social persecution and portrayed as anti-thetically to the progress of the nation. This produced not only religious push back against Catholicism in the Antebellum period, but also political attacks as will be explored in later chapters. The constellation of these Protestant ideas would have a broader effect on the American culture. It's from these Protestants that many of America's earliest and most clear expressions of American exceptionalism first emerged demonstrating the intersection of the two ideas.

The constellation of ideas produced by Protestantism in its earliest American expression through to its later forms as seen in the early nineteenth century, along with its relationship to adjacent outsiders provides compelling evidence for its intersection with American exceptionalism. These Protestants contributed to a culture that was uniquely concerned with national distinction, the special status maintained by members of their groups, and a missional approach to domestic goals.

### **Early American Protestantism**

The story of the Pilgrims and their colony at Plymouth eventually became one of the premier myths of American origins. The connection between that event and the revolutionary principles that motivated the War for Independence and in turn the country's founding are easy to draw. The Pilgrims had escaped persecution in Europe in pursuit of their religious freedom,

just as the revolutionaries had sought their political freedom from a European tyrant. As a result of this association, New England has played a prominent role in the history of American religion.

The Puritans who settled in New England in the early seventeenth century had a profound impact on Protestant thought and their colonial culture. Prior to the Revolution, religion played an integral role in the structure of the state and society in the New England colonies. Church membership was required for civic participation, church attendance was mandated, laws built on biblical morality were instituted, dissenters were persecuted, and communities were built around places of worship. Puritanism structured New England life. John Winthrop, Puritan clergyman who governed of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, delivered a defining sermon enroute to the New World in 1630. *A Model of Christian Charity* presented a Christian ethic for the settlers to live by predicated on brotherly love and mutual affection. Winthrop believed that a covenant between themselves and God had been established, requiring them to abide by that ethic or risk divine wrath.<sup>2</sup>

We are entered into covenant with Him for this work. We have taken out a commission. The Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles. We have professed to enterprise these and those accounts, upon these and those ends. We have hereupon besought Him of favor and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath he ratified this covenant and sealed our Commission, and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it; but if we shall neglect the observation of these articles which are the ends we have propounded, and, dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us.<sup>3</sup>

Winthrop's settlers were distinct from others in their covenantal responsibilities. That covenant in turn implied a special calling, an expectation to act in accord with scripture in order to

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<sup>2</sup> Winthrop, John. "A Model of Christian Charity - 1630." *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*. (Boston, MA: 1838).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

demonstrate to the rest of the world what a community of God looks like in action. These Puritans were to be like a “city on a hill.”<sup>4</sup>

*A Model of Christian Charity* elicits key elements of exceptionalism. The sermon promotes the idea of group distinction and a unique status in reference to God that the settlers maintained. More importantly, through the participatory covenant established between the Puritans and God, it is evident that Winthrop believed he and his fellow voyagers on the *Arbella* were on a divine mission. These elements of the sermon intersect strongly with exceptionalism, which might cause one to argue that it is in fact the first expression of American exceptionalism. At best Winthrop articulates a proto-exceptionalism, one that is devoid of national identity, but over the next one-hundred and fifty years, Protestants in the colonies like Winthrop will begin creating and integrating American identity into their exceptional rhetoric.

Throughout the early eighteenth century, even European observers recognized that there was something unique about the Americas. Bishop George Berkeley, an Irish Anglican clergymen and philosopher, wrote a poem titled “Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America” which reiterated the distinction and special nature of America relative to Europe. Berkeley had travelled to the Americas in the 1720s to establish a university in Bermuda, before settling briefly in Newport, Rhode Island. He describes a distant land where opportunities abound. The continent’s soil is untouched, and nature’s beauty is on full display. Berkeley believed the seeds of a new age were in the Americas. His poem expresses his belief that the establishment of schools and the arts in the New World were to lead to the rise of empire. In contrast, Europe was in a state of decay. Europe’s “heav’nly flame” had been

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

extinguished from the days of her youth. For Berkeley, it was the west that was exceptional, “Westward the course of empire takes its way.”<sup>5</sup>

In the years after Massachusetts Bay was successfully settled by the like of Winthrop’s Puritans and Berkeley’s visit to the Americas, Protestant Christianity continued to play a powerful role in shaping early American culture and society. That worldview would produce one of early America’s brightest intellectuals, Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was an eighteenth century, Massachusetts revivalist and theologian who played a central role in colonial America’s defining religious event. The Great Awakening reestablished the influence of Protestant Christianity in Britain and British North America during the mid-eighteenth century. Christian revivals swept up and down the Eastern seaboard and into the Western frontier. Revivalist preachers such as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards drew massive crowds with their compelling presentations of Calvinism.

The brand of Calvinism taught by the likes of Edwards focused on questions of justification by faith, human depravity, and the work of the Holy Spirit. These themes are seen most clearly in Edwards “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” the sermon most associated with the revivals.<sup>6</sup> For Edwards, human sin produced a total depravity that could not be undone by good deeds, or moral actions. Humans were in a wretched condition that could only be alleviated by the will of God to save sinners from their due punishment. Upon regeneration, one is called to turn from their wicked ways and pursue a pious life in accordance with God’s moral standards.<sup>7</sup> After hearing sermons like these, thousands of people found a renewed faith and

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<sup>5</sup> Berkeley, George. “Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America.” In *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes. By Several Hands. Vol. VI.* (London: printed by J. Hughs, for R. and J. Dodsley, 1763), 311-312.

<sup>6</sup> Edwards, Jonathan and Smolinski, Reiner, Editor, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. A Sermon Preached at Enfield, July 8th, 1741.” (1741). *Electronic Texts in American Studies*. 54.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

reawakened more aware of their own moral failures. The Awakening sparked a new passion for experienced religion opposed to the purely rationalistic, emotionally detached expression of Christianity that had been in vogue since the days of the Enlightenment.

Ultimately, the Great Awakening produced dramatic divisions within American Protestantism. New Lights like Edwards who defended a Calvinistic interpretation of scripture and supported the emotional energy of the revivals were at odds with the Old Lights. The Old Lights were more rationalistic in their approach to Christianity, and they questioned whether the revivals were true works of God. They opposed the Calvinist underpinnings and the methods of the revivals that appeared to them subversive to established church hierarchies.

This divide had lasting socio-cultural ramifications in the wake of the 1740s. New denominations grew in prominence in support of revivalism across the colonies. In Virginia and up into the middle colonies, New Light influence by evangelical Christians slowly started to upend the traditional social order maintained by the gentry and Anglican church. Countercultural Christians, among the most significant of which were the Baptists, brought with them anti-hierarchical systems, new opinions regarding race and slavery, new ethics, and rituals, that were all subversive within Virginian society.<sup>8</sup> That New Light influence also helped to produce an American nationalism that would inspire the unity of the colonies and hopes of reestablishing the covenant between colonial Americans and God. This could only be done by throwing off the chains of British corruption.<sup>9</sup>

Religious leaders on both sides of the revivalist debate started to synthesize their Protestant views with the Enlightenment ideas at the heart of America's revolutionary

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<sup>8</sup> Isaac, Rhys. *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Heimert, Alan. *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1966).

motivation. Edwards was as much a philosopher as he was a clergyman and he often engaged with and built on the works of Enlightenment thinkers including John Locke, whose ideas would profoundly influence the coming revolution. Two of the more striking examples of this ideological synthesis comes from the works of Jonathan Mayhew and Charles Chauncy, who opposed the Edwardsean Calvinist paradigm.

Mayhew was a liberal Congregational clergyman from Boston. His views regarding the unity of God and human salvation put him at odds with Trinitarian Calvinists, but it was his political sentiment that propelled him to prominence. In 1750, he wrote “A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers.” The sermon is a contemporary political commentary on Romans 13:1-8. In it, Mayhew dissects the passage in Romans to describe the proper relationship between Christians and civil authorities. Mayhew reflects on the passage and the role of political leaders saying,

If it be our duty, for example, to obey our king, merely for this reason, that he rules for the public welfare, (which is the only argument the apostle makes use of) it follows, by a parity of reason, that when he turns tyrant, and makes his subjects his prey to devour and to destroy, instead of his charge to defend and cherish, we are bound to throw off our allegiance to him, and to resist.<sup>10</sup>

Here Mayhew’s language calls his readers to action. If tyrannical ruler is failing to abide by God’s ordinances the people have a *mission* to throw off subservience and resist. Mayhew would recognize this form of tyranny during the Stamp Act crisis in 1765 and become a vocal opponent to the tax.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Mayhew, Jonathan A.M., D.D. and Royster, Paul , Editor & Depositor, "A Discourse concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers: With some Reflections on the Resistance made to King Charles I. And on the Anniversary of his Death: In which the Mysterious Doctrine of that Prince's Saintship and Martyrdom is Unriddled." 1750. An Online Electronic Text Edition. Electronic Texts in American Studies. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Mullins, J. Patrick. *Father of Liberty: Jonathan Mayhew and the Principles of the American Revolution*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017).

Charles Chauncy, like Mayhew was a prominent church leader in Boston whose beliefs stirred controversy among the traditional Congregationalists. He came to believe in universal salvation, rather than supporting the limited election of colonial Calvinists. When the Awakening broke out, he became a vocal opponent of revivalism and he employed Enlightenment rationalism to undermine the movement publicly.<sup>12</sup> In the same vein as Mayhew, Chauncy railed against the Stamp Act and attacked the logic of British dominance over the colonies. These types of sermons along side other political sermons, such as election sermons, had a powerful impact on American identity formation.<sup>13</sup> They reinforced the divide between colonists and the English, particularly the ruling class. A sense of *distinction* was being drawn between those on the other sides of the Atlantic. The colonists were able to see themselves a separate people, united by a common mission to oppose tyranny.

As the North American colonies and Great Britain accelerated towards disunion in the 1770s many leading clergymen continued their pronounced role in clarifying the cause. The young grandson of Jonathan Edwards had followed in his grandfather's footsteps and prepared to become a Congregationalist minister. After graduating from Yale in 1769, Timothy Dwight IV would become an outspoken proponent of the American War for Independence. Dwight, more than any other religious thinker of his day, recognized that by 1776, America had adopted a truly national identity. That year, only three weeks after the Declaration of Independence had been adopted, Dwight delivered a valedictory address to the students at Yale University. In that

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<sup>12</sup> Chauncey, Charles. *Divine Glory Brought to View in the Final Salvation of All Men: A Letter to the Friend to Truth*. (Boston: T. and J. Fleet, at the Bible and Heart in Cornhill, 1783).

<sup>13</sup> Walton, Christopher. "Election Sermons and Collective Identity in Massachusetts, 1760-1775" *Journal of the American Revolution*. August 5, 2021.



address, Dwight revealed what had become defining facets of Americanness and wove them together with explicit notions of exceptionalism.<sup>14</sup>

Our cattle and fruits of every kind are without number. Our plants and flowers, for health and pleasure, appear to have been scattered by the same benevolent hand, which called forth the luxuriance of Eden. All that the wish of an epicure, the pride of a beauty, or the curious mind of a naturalist can ask to variegate the table of luxury, to increase the shine of splendor, or delight the endless thirst of knowledge, is showered in profusion on this, the favorite land of heaven.

For Dwight, Americans were now a people of a defined place. The land was theirs, and the land gave them boundaries that clearly separated them from others. That land was divinely blessed with unparalleled resources confirming the special status of America relative to the rest of the world. Even the very lay of the land provided Americans with “naval and commercial advantages, *superior* to those of any state on earth.”<sup>15</sup>

I proceed then to observe, that this continent is inhabited by a people, who have the same religion, the same manners, the same interests, the same language, and the same essential forms and principles of civil government.

In comparing Americans to Europeans, Dwight describes what he sees as shared bonds of American identity that transcend location. These social ties of politics, religion, language, and culture are at the heart of that separates Americans from Europeans.<sup>16</sup>

In Dwight’s mind, all human history has progressed towards this moment: “This empire is commencing, at a period, when every species of knowledge, natural and moral, is arrived to a state of perfection.” Borrowing from the Enlightenment, he sees science and reason as foundational to the American empire. Meanwhile, he portrays the empires of Europe as backwards, barbaric, and wholly unsophisticated. Ultimately, Dwight believes that “this

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<sup>14</sup> Dwight, Timothy. “A Valedictory Address to the Young Gentlemen, Who Commenced Bachelors of Arts, at Yale-College.” (July 25th. 1776). Evans Early American Imprint Collection. The University of Michigan. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N11665.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

continent will be the principal seat of that new, that peculiar kingdom, which shall be given to the Saints of the Most High.”<sup>17</sup> America isn’t merely superior to Europe, it has a millennial destiny. Millennialism was the belief in the future establishment of a God’s kingdom foretold in Christian scripture. In that kingdom, Christian values and ethics would prevail and a divine paradise would be inaugurated. Some Protestants believed Christ would return to earth shepherding in the millennium, while others believed the millennium would precede the return of Christ.<sup>18</sup> Dwight, like other Protestant thinkers after him, would argue that people played a role in bringing about the millennium by righting society’s ills and turning from sin.

Fulfilling that destiny requires actions Dwight explains. He calls his listeners to take up a “divine patriotism.”

For our actions ought all to be inspired, and directed by a comprehensive regard to this scene of glory, which is hastening to a completion, with a rapidity suited to it's importance. This, young Gentlemen, is the field in which you are to act.<sup>19</sup>

Dwight wants his listeners to take part in advancing this coming kingdom. He calls them each to their own unique *mission*. These students are to take an active role in bringing about the success of the American experiment and in turn ushering in the kingdom of God.

A year later, Dwight would write a hymn that catalyzed the ideas he expounded in his speech at Yale in 1776. “Columbia” was written while Dwight was serving as a Continental chaplain in the War for Independence. In it he drew sharp distinctions between America and Europe. Columbia was portrayed as Edenic. It was the champion of freedom, morality, and reason. Europe was rendered as barbaric and criminal. Drawing on millennial themes, all nations

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Tuveson, Ernest. *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

would bow before the kingdom established in America upon fulfilling its destiny.<sup>20</sup> It was less than thirty-five years earlier that Dwight's grandfather, Jonathan Edwards had argued that America would be the location of the coming millennium in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New-England*.<sup>21</sup> In that short time, beliefs concerning the special role America as a place played in history converged with a developing national identity, in turn integrating that perception of a special role to a particular *people*. If America was to be the home of the millennium, the American people would have to play a role in that fulfillment.

"Columbia" and Dwight's address to the students at Yale in the year prior are two of the earliest and most clear expressions of American exceptionalism. In the sources, the core themes of national distinction, special status, and missional calling are all present in full force. They are conveyed within overt Protestant symbolism and language. Religion was vital to the transmission of these ideas in the revolutionary period. This early exceptional identity was now being directly tied to an emerging nationalism by Protestant thinkers using Protestant language. In the early republican years following the American revolution, Protestantism continued to entrench its intersection with American exceptionalism, further binding the two concepts into a unique national identity shaped by new cultural and political challenges.

### **Protestantism in the Early Republic**

When American won its independence, the new country had only passed its first major test. Now that independence was secured, a government had to be forged to meet the needs of a diverse country. That system of governance would immediately have to face an array of

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<sup>20</sup> Dwight IV, Timothy. "Ode to Columbia." (1777). Evans Early American Imprint Collection. The University of Michigan. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N20523.0001.001/1:1?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

<sup>21</sup> Edwards, Jonathan. "Some thoughts concerning the present revival of religion in New-England, and the way in which it ought to be acknowledged and promoted." (Boston: Printed and sold by S. Kneeland and T. Green in Queen-Street, 1742). <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N04004.0001.001>

considerable challenges. Americans were moving west across the continent beyond the borders of the thirteen original states, and opening the new frontier. Conflicts with native tribes continued as a result. The issue of slavery created greater sectional tension between the North and South. Industrialization soon transformed everything from the economy to where and how people lived. Immigration would equally become a major political issue to be navigated in the Antebellum period.

In those years after the American revolution, Protestantism, like the political situation in the country, was in a state of flux. External and internal factors started shifting the religious dynamic. France's revolution had sparked fears within American religious communities that secularism would soon invade North America. Since the close of the first Great Awakening in 1750s, it appeared to many contemporary observers that religion was in decline and that the America Christian community was nearing a place of crisis.<sup>22</sup> Intense theological crisis would threaten to divide the Protestant community over the nature of God. Powerful Unitarian voices leveled attacks on traditional Trinitarians and began rising to positions of power within American society.

William Ellery Channing, America's leading Unitarian, argued powerfully for the unity of God in opposition to the tri-partite Trinitarian conception of God. Through the early nineteenth century Channing had established himself as a thought leader in New England Protestantism.<sup>23</sup> Sharing in Channing's unitary theology was Henry Ware, who in 1805 was appointed chair of Harvard Divinity School signaling the continued rise of Unitarianism.

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<sup>22</sup> Miller, Perry. *The Life of the Mind in America: from the Revolution to the Civil War*. (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1965). 3-5.

<sup>23</sup> Madden, Edward H. "William Ellery Channing: Philosopher, Critic of Orthodoxy, and Cautious Reformer." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 33, no. 3 (1997): 558–88.

Calvinist Trinitarians were deeply alarmed at these developments. In response to these assaults on their own theological worldview, leading Calvinists published defenses of their belief systems and sought to undermine Unitarian doctrine. Leonard Woods was a Trinitarian theologian at the conservative Andover Seminary. In 1820, Woods wrote a scathing critique of Unitarian thought titled a *Letters to Unitarians*.<sup>24</sup> Henry Ware would in turn counter Woods' public letter creatively titled *Letters Addressed to Trinitarians and Calvinists*.<sup>25</sup> These intense debates between traditional Calvinists and more liberal minded Unitarians demonstrate the dynamism of Protestant Christianity in the early republic. Despite employing powerful rationalistic arguments against much of the Trinitarian worldview, Unitarians failed to stem the tide of evangelical revivalism that was about to have a second act in American history.<sup>26</sup>

Among the leaders of the traditional Calvinists was Presbyterian minister, Lyman Beecher. Beecher was educated at Timothy Dwight's Yale University before becoming a minister in New York and later throughout New England early in his career. He was an outspoken opponent of Unitarianism, intemperance, and slavery. Beecher would become prominent figures during America's Second Great Awakening and like Timothy Dwight, play a significant part in advancing exceptionalism.

The Second Great Awakening lasted forty years beginning in the late 1790s through to the late 1830s. Much like the first awakening, the later one was a series of Protestant revivals that swept across the country, revivifying American's Protestant Christianity. These revivals not only captivated Americans in the east but were fruitful in camp meetings throughout the new

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<sup>24</sup> Woods, Leonard. *Letters to Unitarians: Occasioned by the Sermon of the Reverend William E. Channing at the Ordination of the Rev. J. Sparks*. Andover: Flagg and Gould, 1820.

<sup>25</sup> Ware, Henry. *Letters Addressed to Trinitarians and Calvinists*. Cambridge: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1820.

<sup>26</sup> Miller, Perry. *The Life of the Mind in America*. 1956. 17-21.

western frontier in Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee. Membership in Baptist and Methodist churches soared to new heights.

Various Protestant outsider groups grew out of the awakening as well. Utopian communities sprung up who were often motivated by perfectionism and millennialism to live as a model for others to follow and bring “heaven on earth.”<sup>27</sup> A particularly American form of Christianity, Mormonism, emerged out of the later stages of the awakening. Mormons faced significant persecution for their beliefs and migrated west to escape discrimination, but many of their beliefs would reinforce notions of American exceptionalism. They argued that the Garden of Eden once existed in Missouri and that in Jackson County the New Jerusalem would be established, that Jesus visited the Americas after his resurrection, and that the US Constitution was divinely inspired.<sup>28</sup> Despite not neatly fitting into the category of Protestantism, Mormons and utopians shared ideas with Protestants that furthered the advancement of exceptionalism within the religious sphere.

Out of the Second Great Awakening would come two converging ideological forces for the promotion of American exceptionalism about which Protestant leaders would speak widely, an emphasis on millennial theology and social reform. In an attempt to expose the unique sins of the nation in order to pursue reforms needed to inaugurate the millennium, Protestants further contributed to national identity formation.<sup>29</sup>

Lyman Beecher was a reform minded Protestant. Through the promotion of Christian voluntarism Beecher hoped to use religious organizations to cleanse the nation of its sins. For

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<sup>27</sup> Walters, Ronald G. *American Reformers, 1815-1860*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1978). 39.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, Joseph, Jr. *Doctrine and covenants of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints*. Section 57. Kirtland, Ohio: Printed by F.G. Williams & Co. for the Proprietors, 1835.; 3 Nephi. *The Book of Mormon*. 2000. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.; Reynolds, Noel B. “The Doctrine of An Inspired Constitution.” *Brigham Young University Studies* 16, no. 3 (1976): 315–40.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, Perry. *The Life of the Mind in America*. 6

Beecher, the failures of the American nation prevented the country from attaining its national destiny. In 1827, Beecher published a series of sermons on intemperance, which he perceived as one of the country's most perilous national sins. These sermons illustrate the relationship between national destiny and reform many Protestant leaders promoted.

America was “a nation which is the freest, and is destined to become the greatest” of all other nations. God had given the country a special status that could only be attained if the American people fulfilled their duty.<sup>30</sup> Here Beecher echoes covenantal theology. In hopes of fulfilling that duty Beecher called Christian Americans to action. He advocated individuals take up the mission of total abstinence from imbibing alcohol in any context, mirroring Edwards' advocacy for Calvinistic individual piety. Then he called those successful in their intemperance to become shining examples within their own communities.

When you have secured your own house-hold — let your benevolence extend to those around you. Become in your neighborhood, and throughout the whole extent of your intercourse and influence, a humble, affectionate, determined reformer.<sup>31</sup>

Antebellum Protestants during the Second Great Awakening took the Calvinist implications a step further. Beecher called for communal piety and responsibility. It was not enough for individuals to act against the sin of intemperance in their own lives. What was needed to save the nation from damnation and collapse was collective action.

Later in his career, Beecher would move west to Ohio where he became president of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati. There he continued his reform work and wrote a book revealing his millennial vision for the west titled *A Plea for the West*. Beecher concurred with

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<sup>30</sup> Beecher, Lyman. *Six Sermons on the Nature, Occasions, Signs, Evils, and Remedy of Intemperance*. (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1827). 101

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

Edwards that America was destined to be the site of the new millennium and that the west was uniquely primed for that role.<sup>32</sup>

It is equally plain that the religious and political destiny of our nation is to be decided in the West... the West is destined to be the great central power of the nation, and under heaven, must affect powerfully the cause of free institutions and the liberty of the world. Again, Beecher argues that to fulfill that exceptional millennial calling, Americans must take up the mission of seeing that out. He endorsed the creation of religious and educational institutions in the west as well as continued settlement. Beecher believed schooling and moral education would produce a prosperous society in the new frontier. Building universities and churches, training teachers and ministers was of utmost priority.<sup>33</sup>

There was a great threat, in Beecher's estimation, to the project of millennial preparation in the West, immigration from Europe. Beecher feared the influence European immigrants would have within American politics and culture.

Half a million of unprincipled, reckless voters, in the hands of demagogues, may, in our balanced elections, overrule all the property, and wisdom, and moral principle of the nation. This danger from uneducated mind is augmenting daily by the rapid influx of foreign emigrants.<sup>34</sup>

The uneducated masses pouring into the country would undercut all of the foundational religious, social, and political principles the nation was built on Beecher argued. As a Protestant, Beecher believed Protestant Christianity was a central part of American identity and destiny. It was not the mere lack of education of immigrants that he was wary of, but also the Catholic faith they brought with them.

“The Catholic system is adverse to liberty, and the clergy to a great extent are dependent on foreigners opposed to the principles of our government, for patronage and support.”<sup>35</sup> Beecher

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<sup>32</sup> Beecher, Lyman. *A Plea for the West*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cincinnati, OH: Truman and Smith, 1835). 10-11.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 13-42.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*. 50-51.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 61.



railed against the threat of Catholic priests controlling their parishioners politically. European Catholics were enmeshed in despotic tendencies and too closely tied to European monarchs he claimed. He also warned the Protestant community of what he saw as the dangers of Catholic education.

Anti-Catholic and anti-European rhetoric in *A Plea for the West* reveals a potential tendency of exceptionalism towards exclusion and othering. When exceptionalism applies to a particular place or people, outsiders can be viewed as such. The implications of these ideas was that Beecher had called for the prohibition of Catholic immigration westward. During the early republic, this sentiment eventually materialized into a powerful political movement and anti-Catholic violence.

Much of the same themes can be found in the works of another leading Antebellum Protestant theologian, Horace Bushnell. Bushnell was an innovative, controversial Congregational minister. His liberal beliefs were well outside of the conservative mainstream in Protestant thought in his day. He opposed literalist interpretations of Biblical texts advocating instead for the importance of understanding symbol, myth, and metaphor in their historical context. Rather than supporting the Calvinist penal substitutionary view of atonement, he promoted something akin to Abelard's moral theory. These views alongside his perspectives on the Trinity prompted conservatives to level attacks against him as a heretic.<sup>36</sup>

Bushnell's most prominent work, *Christian Nurture*, was transformative within the domain of Christian education. He argued that becoming a Christian was not a spontaneous occurrence as the revivalist had asserted. Instead, becoming a Christian is the result of the

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<sup>36</sup> Edwards, Robert L. *Of Singular Genius, of Singular Grace: A Biography of Horace Bushnell*. (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1992).

process of a living and learning Christian ethics. Bushnell believed parents and the family ought to be the foundation of a child's Christian upbringing.<sup>37</sup>

Despite being on opposite ends of the Protestant theological spectrum, Bushnell and Beecher shared a belief in American exceptionalism as a result of their Protestant worldview. Ten years before writing *Christian Nurture*, Bushnell delivered an address to students at Yale in August of 1837. He titled the address "The True Wealth or Weal of Nations." In it he argued that the wealth of a particular nation was derived explicitly from the value of people that comprised that nation.<sup>38</sup>

"National wealth is personal, not material. It includes the natural capacity, the industry, the skill, the science, the bravery, the loyalty, the moral and religious worth of the people."<sup>39</sup> He contended that the people of the American were the people of greatest value. Bushnell goes beyond describing exceptionality of America as a place. He invokes exceptionalism in direct relation to the American people, narrowly defined in racial and ethnic terms.

Out of all the inhabitants of the world, too, a select stock; the Saxon, and out of this the British family, the noblest of the stock; was chosen to people our country; that our eagle, like that of the prophet, might have the cedars of Lebanon, and the topmost branches of the cedars, to plant by his great waters.<sup>40</sup>

In this passage, Bushnell echoes the millennial destiny of the young country described by Edwards, Dwight, and Beecher. "Almighty Providence" foreordained the nation to greatness, and that all of history was culminating towards America's special calling.<sup>41</sup>

To defend his thesis, Bushnell compares the American people to Mexicans. He draws sharp racial conclusions calling the Mexican people violent, immoral, greedy, and lawless. When

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<sup>37</sup> Bushnell, Horace. *Christian Nurture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company. 1979.

<sup>38</sup> Bushnell, Horace. "The True Wealth or Weal of Nations." Yale University. 1837.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

the Mexican ancestors came to the land they conquered the Natives, plundered the land, failed to develop a functioning economy and institutions, according to Bushnell. Despite having abundant resources and a rich land, their empire collapsed in light of their lack of personal value. In contrast, Bushnell claims that the American people came to their lands not as conquerors, but as humble settlers bringing with them religion, education, and proper governance. Navigating hardship and disease, the American people produced enduring institutions and forged a “mighty nation,” expanding across the continent. Bushnell concluded that Anglo-Saxon Americans were unequivocally superior those of Mexican stock, revealing yet again the potential for exceptionalism to other people outside assumed boundaries, be they geographical or racial.<sup>42</sup>

While Bushnell and Beecher are no doubt strong examples of Protestant thinkers promoting exceptionalism in the Antebellum era, any exploration of that topic would be left wanting without an examination of the great revivalist, Charles Grandison Finney. Finney was a Presbyterian evangelist who perhaps more than any other person, became tantamount to the Second Great Awakening. He was a captivating orator whose innovative methods of evangelism sparked religious excitement wherever he went. During his missions throughout western New York Finney whipped up uncontrollable spiritual enthusiasm. This portion of the state became defined by this experience earning the name the “burned-over district” on behalf of the revivals that spread like wildfire across the region. These revivals in the Northeast of the country helped propel him to national prominence before his eventual move to the west.<sup>43</sup>

Finney moved to Ohio in 1837. There he became a pastor in a church closely connected to Oberlin College where he would eventually become president. During his time in Oberlin,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Cross, Whitney. *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950). 153.

Finney his work as an ardent reformer. He believed slavery was the nations great sin. Oberlin College was at the cutting edge of abolitionism during Finney's tenure there. Black and white students attended classes together, the school facilitated movement of enslaved persons along the Underground Railroad to their freedom, and Finney himself was outspoken against the evil institution.

In 1835, Finney delivered his notable "Lectures on Revivals of Religion" where he spoke passionately about the need for the church to engage in reform.

As on the subject of slavery and temperance, so on this subject, the church must act right or the country will be ruined. God cannot sustain this free and blessed country, which we love and pray for, unless the church will take right ground. Politics are a part of religion in such a country as this, and Christians must do their duty to the country as a part of their duty to God.<sup>44</sup>

Finney believed that the church had a responsibility to act on these issues. He was a Christian perfectionist, who believed that believers had the capacity to conquer sin and that they were in fact called to pursue moral perfection despite its difficulty. That principle intersected with his belief in the eminent millennium. For Finney, the nation had to pursue perfection if the millennium was to arrive; that meant reform was vital to bringing about the fulfillment of the country's destiny. In that same year Finney proclaimed publicly that "if the church will do her duty, the Millennium may come in this country in three years."<sup>45</sup> Like many American Protestant thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, he believed that the public had to address their own sin as well as collective, or national, sin to allow God's kingdom to be ushered in in the United States. That implied the immediate abolition of slavery.

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<sup>44</sup> From Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, ed. William G. McLoughlin. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960).

<sup>45</sup> Bratt, James D. "The Reorientation of American Protestantism, 1835-1845." *Church History* 67, no. 1 (1998): 52.

Beecher, Bushnell, and Finney were among the most prominent Protestants of the early republic. They each cast a wide net of cultural influence across the country in their day. Despite their various theological differences, their work demonstrates significant overlap in regard to their views on the millennium, social reform, and the special nature of America and its people. These ideas are intimately related. When woven together they form the thematic foundation for American exceptionalism. America and the American people are unique, different from the rest of the world. God has given the country a special millennial destiny and He called a special people to oversee the fulfillment of that national calling through abandoning sin and the active reformation of society. Early Americans who bought into these Protestant ideas would inevitably arrive at their own exceptional identity.

The rhetoric and language articulated by Protestant thinkers from the pre-Revolutionary period on through the Antebellum period provided Americans outside of the religious sphere with the tools needed to advance social and political programs predicated on exceptionalism. Statesmen, activists, and public intellectuals employed the very same themes conveyed by theologians, ministers, and evangelists further cementing American exceptionalism into the country's national identity.

## CHAPTER II: AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM IN THE SECULAR AND POLITICAL SPHERE

Thomas Jefferson advocated for the construction of a “wall of separation between the church and state” in the young republic he helped forge.<sup>1</sup> In America, this divide between the religious and governmental is perceived as a foundational constitutional principle. The establishment clause has created what has appeared to be two separate spheres, one of the states and one of the churches, within American public life. That perception is deceiving. Faith and politics are far more integrated than most people care to recognize. In American culture, the two meet at a confluence. This was particularly that case in the formative years of the republic and on into the Antebellum period. During this time there was a thin line between philosophy and theology, as well as religion and politics. Politicians were often motivated by their religious worldview and religious leaders directly engaged in politics.

Considering the structure of this project, it may seem as if the duality between the religious and the political is being upheld. On the contrary. There was a deep connection between these facets of American intellectual life. To best draw this out, it is helpful to examine religious leaders separately from secular and political leaders. When examined alongside one another, what becomes evident is that both contributed to the fostering of America’s exceptional identity through shared ideas. Those outside the religious sphere by virtue of their occupation, nonetheless, borrowed language, themes, and symbols from America’s Protestant thinkers when formulating and expressing their own conceptions of American exceptionalism.

Prior to 1776, American colonists promoted their inherent distinction from Europe; they came to see themselves on a mission guided by Providence to establish a great nation. Ideas

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<sup>1</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. “To the Danbury Baptist Association.” January 1, 1802. Found in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 36: 1 December 1801 to 3 March 1802*. (Princeton University Press, 2009). 258

shaped by exceptionalism helped inspire revolutionary sentiment and motivate Americans to act against Great Britain. When independence was finally achieved, the next task for America's leaders would be to effectively unite a republic. The political goals that emerged during the Jefferson administration actualized American exceptionalism within the framework of a vision for the new nation.

Many of those Jeffersonian goals would persist well into the Antebellum period. The west would become a central theme in American public discourse. As Americans pursued their manifest destiny and migrated into the western frontier, they found themselves at odds with Native Americans. Justified by their own perception of superiority as a chosen people, Americans pushed the Native Americans from their homes. Nineteenth century political programs ranging from Jacksonian Indian Removal to the Polk's Mexican American War were products of American exceptionalism.

Finally, by the late 1830s, American exceptionalism had become a fully developed idea. It had settled in as a dominant form of identity that was used to shape politics and public discourse. In the late Antebellum period, Americans were not only concerned with the west. Immigration, social reform, and slavery were on the minds of a great deal of public figures. Reformers, political activists, and secular thinkers used American exceptionalism to consider each of these domestic challenges. The idea was so prevalent that it defined the way historians of the day understood American's past. Exceptionalist rhetoric peaked in those days before the very foundations of the idea would be confronted by the American Civil War.

From the revolutionaries and republicans through its high tide, the same Protestant intellectual themes of distinction, special status, and mission were used by political and secular figures alike to articulate American exceptionalism. By examining the published work, speeches,

and personal correspondence of the political and secular actors of those epochs in the early republic the intersection between Protestantism and exceptionalism is further revealed.

## **Revolutionaries and Republicans**

At the doorstep of the American Revolution, many American colonists believed that this continent was primed for an exceptional future.<sup>2</sup> In 1765, John Adams was a budding revolutionary incensed by the Stamp Act and British violation of basic principles of representation. Despite his concerns about the politics of the moment he articulated a special destiny for his home. America "...was destined by Providence for the Theatre, on which Man was to make his true figure, on which science, Virtue, Liberty, Happiness and Glory were to exist in Peace."<sup>3</sup> Among Enlightenment rationalists, such as Adams, Paine and Jefferson, aversion to directly invoke God compelled new symbolic expressions that became commonplace within a new growing civic religion. "Providence" replaced traditional Protestant and Christian language for the divine, but nonetheless harkened back to it.<sup>4</sup> The deistic replacement of overtly Protestant language by Enlightenment minded thinkers widened the audience of exceptionalist rhetoric to those outside the strict boundaries of Protestantism. Later in the nineteenth century, after the Second Great Awakening resuscitated American Protestantism, that Enlightenment, rationalist language was reintegrated with more overt evangelical Christian symbolism.

What Adams claimed in 1765 revealed a lot about how Americans understood their special place in the universe and their particular calling in the years before the War for

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<sup>2</sup> Wood, Gordon S. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. (New York, NY: Vintage Books. 1993). 190.

<sup>3</sup> Wood, Gordon S. *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969). 569.

<sup>4</sup> Bellah, Robert N. *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992). 45.



Independence. God had destined the continent to bring about the culmination of human progress. Humanity was finally capable of synthesizing the transcendent values promoted during Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. Rationality, moral virtue, and ordered liberty converged in the American mind and, according to Adams, who subtly points to Protestant millennial themes, this is what will prepare the way for peace.

Peace would have to wait when the conflict between the rebellious colonies and Great Britain came to a head at Lexington and Concord in 1775. In the aftermath of that moment a British born revolutionary would become of the standard bearer for American exceptionalism. Most of Paine's life was spent in Europe; he arrived in America quite late in the timeline of the British American turmoil. Despite this, Paine, perhaps more than any other "American" did more to ignite revolutionary passion when he authored *Common Sense* in 1776, a scathing critique of British authority in America. Paine used the language of the common man to challenge the monarchy and stir up support for American independence.<sup>5</sup> In doing so he drew on the core themes of exceptionalism. He saw in America the opportunity to reorganize the world.

...we have every opportunity and every encouragement before us, to form the noblest, purest constitution on the face of the earth. We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand, and a race of men, perhaps as numerous as all Europe contains, are to receive their portion of freedom from the events of a few months.<sup>6</sup>

For Paine, America's mission was to throw off the yoke of European monarchy, which had produced nothing but tyranny and corruption. Here in the New World, human society could at last return to the garden of Eden and start the world anew if only Americans would take up arms

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<sup>5</sup> Unger, Harlow G. *Thomas Paine and the Clarion Call for American Independence*. (New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Paine, Thomas. *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, Collected and Edited by Moncure Daniel Conway New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1894. Vol. 1.

against their oppressor. If they succeed, Paine called on the American people to forge a system of government unlike anything the world knew at that time. He proposed a constitutional republic with a representative congress that protects the natural rights of man and where the law is king.

Paine saw self-government in America as a natural right particularly because he believed Americans were truly distinct from the British. The national interest of Americans and Britons were at odds. The differences exceeded geography. Americans were diverse in religion and national origin, a people of shared experience, and they were more interested in commerce than conquest. Independence was the mission this people was called to. If they answered Paine's call, they might see their continent become the "glory of the earth."<sup>7</sup>

To see that glory, Paine argued that Americans had to defend a moral imperative. Europe was the seat of corruption and casting them off was the only way to effectively pursue virtue in America. This idea was widely trafficked among American Protestants who for their part demonized England who was responsible for facilitating the moral degradation of American society.<sup>8</sup> John Adams reflecting this belief said of the War for Independence, that it "will have this good Effect... it will inspire us with many virtues... and correct many Errors, Follies, and Vices." For the Americans to succeed they would need purify their vices, and an augment their virtues. Without it, they could not expect Providential blessing.<sup>9</sup> This mission of reestablishing moral virtue as one goal within the independence movement demonstrates how Protestant thought and political action merged to advance revolution.

Paine used language and themes in *Common Sense* that was common in Protestant circles to express his revolutionary vision, but he was not religious himself. In 1794 he published *The*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Wood, Gordon S. *The Creation of the American Republic*. 1969. 114-118.

<sup>9</sup> Adams to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776. Found in Wood, Gordon S. *The Creation of the American Republic*. 1969. 117.

*Age of Reason* in which he upheld his belief in a deistic god who did not interfere in the universe. He sharply rejected Christianity and other organized religions.<sup>10</sup> After leveling his critiques against Christianity Paine fell out of favor with the American public seriously damaging his legacy.<sup>11</sup> What *Common Sense* and the reaction to *The Age of Reason* demonstrated about the revolutionary generation was that religion resonated with the people; it was a powerful cultural force that inspired reaction. That is not to say that *Common Sense* had the influence it did because of the religious language it employed. But that same mission oriented, “providential” rhetoric remained a normal part of the political discourse throughout the era of the early republic, because of its cultural resonance. Paine’s religious critiques largely removed him from the good graces of the very people who would have taken that language seriously, and who were already beginning to integrate the exceptional ideas that were transmitted by it into their identity.

Ultimately, Paine’s pro-revolutionary pamphlet swept through the colonies like wildfire and helped shift colonial attitudes towards independence. Six months after *Common Sense* was published, the Continental Congress approved the very thing of which Paine dreamed. The Declaration of Independence made it clear that colonial Americans had not only recognized their distinction from the English system, but that they were willing to pursue political separation no matter the cost. The signers pledged their lives to the cause, relying on Providence to see them through, despite long odds.<sup>12</sup> What Jefferson and the founders had done was swear into a form of sacred covenant, echoing Winthrop’s Puritan covenant with God to create a city on a hill over one-hundred and forty years earlier.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Paine, Thomas. *The Age of Reason: Being and Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology*. 1794.

<sup>11</sup> Unger, Harlow G. *Thomas Paine and the Clarion Call for American Independence*. 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Bellah, Robert N. *The Broken Covenant*. 1992. 27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

During the six years of the conflict, the Americans, led by George Washington, would outlast the most powerful empire on earth. England maintained the world's largest navy, a well-trained, experienced regular army, a daunting war chest, and a large population at home to resupply and reinforce the military. The sheer fact alone of victory invoked the potential of exceptional explanations and divine national calling.

With England defeated, the revolutionary project had only just begun. The task of forging a united republic out of thirteen colonies with unique political interests would be equally as challenging as the first national task had been. The original attempt by the founders to outline a government under the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union had proved to be a disaster. Civil unrest in the face of economic crisis and the inability of the Confederation Congress to respond to violent uprisings sounded its death knell.<sup>14</sup> Reconciling an exceptional identity in the face of an imploding republic would have been impossible. The creation of a new Constitution averted that crisis in 1787.

The mission of creating a viable republican government capable of governing over a rapidly growing population and expanding borders was of primary importance to the founders. James Madison, who was deeply involved in crafting the American Constitution recognized how ambitious, yet vital, that task was.<sup>15</sup> Victory over Great Britain would have been meaningless without the successful creation of a unified, representative government. If the ideas that inspired the revolution proved fruitless, how could America ever be seen as a nation of destiny? After much debate, the Constitution was drawn up and ratified by the thirteen original states opening a new chapter in America's national history.

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<sup>14</sup> Wood, Gordon S. *The Creation of the American Republic*. 1969. 464.

<sup>15</sup> Madison, James. *Federalist Papers No. 10: The Same Subject Continued The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection*. From the New York Packet. 1787. Avalon Project. Yale Law School. [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/fed10.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp)

In the following years, two competing visions for the young republic would define a new political era. John Adams' Federalists and Thomas Jefferson's Democratic Republicans vied for the power to embed their worldview into American governance. After serving as chief executive for four years after Washington left office, Adams' conception of America had changed. The exceptional vision he had for America before the revolution had long disappeared. He came to argue that there was "no special providence for Americans, and their nature is the same with that of others."<sup>16</sup> He positioned himself in such a way to oppose any furtherance of exceptional identity within American political culture.<sup>17</sup>

In 1800, Americans elected a new president to replace the embittered Adams with Thomas Jefferson who, rather than denying American exceptionalism promoted it. Under Jefferson's vision for the nation, American exceptionalism was made programmatic for the first time in American politics. Upon his inauguration he hoped to make America into a republican city on the hill for all nations to admire and emulate.

solid republican government maintained here, will be a standing monument & example for the aim & imitation of the people of other countries; and I join with you in the hope and belief that they will see from our example that a free government is of all others the most energetic, that the enquiry which has been excited among the mass of mankind by our revolution & its consequences will ameliorate the condition of man over a great portion of the globe.<sup>18</sup>

The Jeffersonian paradigm was built around the ordinary citizens of the country and the popular masses. He had hoped to craft an agrarian republic built by self-reliant Americans who honored their civic virtue. The country was in the early stages of industrialization but was still

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<sup>16</sup> Wood, Gordon S. *Friends Divided: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson*. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2018). 215.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> "From Thomas Jefferson to John Dickinson, 6 March 1801," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-33-02-0156>. [Original source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 33, 17 February–30 April 1801, ed. Barbara B. Oberg. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 196–197.]

overwhelmingly agricultural. Jefferson positioned himself to represent the interests of that majority. He believed that class played a special role in the ascension of the republic.

Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had chosen people, whose breasts he has made his particular deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth.<sup>19</sup>

Farmers were an occupational class of people that Jefferson valued the most. The agrarian who provided for himself and for the commerce of the nation via exports was incorruptible in Jefferson's eyes. They would not rely on international markets or government for their prosperity. This is what enabled them to remain virtuous and share those virtues in their public lives, thus preserving the future destiny of the republic. In order to ensure that agrarian vision triumphed over what was a steadily growing urban, industrial class, Jefferson needed to broaden the frontier.

Jeffersonians and Federalists alike saw expansion as key to America's future. Jefferson anxiously awaited the day when the American people would expand over not just North America, but even into South America.<sup>20</sup> He even believed that Canada would inevitably join the Union. When Napoleon gave Jefferson the opportunity to purchase Louisiana, he jumped at the offer in spite of his concerns over its constitutionality. The purchase doubled the size of the United States in one fell swoop. The newly acquired territory all but guaranteed the continued growth of American agriculture.

Expansion was a vital to creating Jefferson's "empire of liberty."<sup>21</sup> For Jefferson the exceptional nature of America's political system necessitated imparting the benefits of American

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<sup>19</sup> Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Philadelphia, 1825. p. 224. (written 1781-82.) found in Tuveson, Ernest. *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 1968. 109.

<sup>20</sup> Jefferson to Monroe. Nov. 4, 1801. Found in Murrin, John M. "The Jeffersonian Triumph and American Exceptionalism." *Journal of the Early Republic* 20, no. 1 (2000): 1-25.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, April 27, 1809. Manuscript letter. The Library of Congress. [//www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/jeffwest.html#149](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/jeffwest.html#149)

governance to the rest of the world.<sup>22</sup> In North America that implied territorial expansion, but in terms of foreign policy that meant using commerce to manipulate European states. Jefferson believed that Europe, particularly England, was driven by their militaristic, despotic tendencies.<sup>23</sup> He was also a Francophile who developed a strong admiration for French culture while serving as a foreign emissary there.<sup>24</sup> He hoped a victory for the liberal revolutionaries would validate American governance against the backdrop of English monarchy. But the rise of Napoleon and the wars he launched would stifle his faith in France's republican hopes for some time.<sup>25</sup> Europe's two great powers were evidently flawed. America on the other hand, was the bastion of peace. He actively pursued down-sizing America's military force, preferring instead to rely on state and local militias for national defense. Rather than using the army and navy to export American influence, Jefferson would use trade policy to shape foreign nations. By placing an embargo on British goods, he wanted to demonstrate how to peacefully respond to injustices. This, he had hoped, would prevent European states in the future from resorting to armed conflict as they naturally inclined. America would model for Europe what progress looked like and spread republican virtues abroad to the corrupt corners of the world.<sup>26</sup>

Jefferson's foreign policy was entirely unmilitaristic. As it related to European states, Jefferson was clearly opposed to engaging in open conflict, but the Atlantic World that America operated in was home to others. The United States was becoming a commercial country looking to export goods around the world. American trade ships looking to sell goods to the far east

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<sup>22</sup> Murrin, John M. "The Jeffersonian Triumph and American Exceptionalism." *Journal of the Early Republic* 20, no. 1 (2000): 1–25.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 18-19.

<sup>24</sup> Wood, Gordon. *Friends Divided*. 2017. 262.

<sup>25</sup> Shulim, Joseph I. "Thomas Jefferson Views Napoleon." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 60, no. 2 (1952): 288–304.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 15-16.

would need to pass through the Mediterranean. A loose collection of North African states engaged in state sponsored piracy exerting their control over Mediterranean trade. Like British and French trade ships, American ships were asked to pay tribute to these pirates to guarantee safe passage in and out of the sea. Thomas Jefferson refused to meet the North African's demands preempting the Barbary Wars.

The North African pirates were different adversaries that the Europeans in terms of economic and military capabilities, but also in terms of race and religion. Jefferson viewed them as “barbarians” who could be forced to a peace through the pains of war.<sup>27</sup> Unlike with the Europeans, Jefferson was willing to pursue war with the Muslim, North African kingdoms. It is safe to say that the young American nation could not afford a naval war with Britain and that the Barbary pirates were a more manageable enemy, but Jefferson did not avoid war with any European powers because of any mere cost-benefit analysis. His mission was, in part, to transmit American republican virtues including peace to Europe. This was evidently not the case with North Africa, demonstrating at very least the capacity for the Jeffersonian exceptional vision for othering.<sup>28</sup>

From the revolution through the formative years of the republic American exceptionalism materialized into a powerful cultural idea. As recognition of national distinction, fused with a fresh understanding of America's chosen destiny it prompted the revolutionary action Thomas Paine promoted. Less than twenty years after the conclusion of the War for Independence, President Thomas Jefferson took up the mission of diffusing American glory across the continent and across the Atlantic. Jefferson gave American exceptionalism political legs. He advocated for

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<sup>27</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. “Fourth Annual Message to Congress.” November 8, 1804. Avalon Project. Yale Law School. [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/jeffmes4.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jeffmes4.asp)

<sup>28</sup> Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. (New York, NY: Random House Inc, 1978).



the virtue of agrarian principles, successfully expanded the country into the continent, and sought to influence Europe by way of his uniquely American foreign policy. What the revolutionaries and republicans of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries started would become further engrained into the America's national identity during the mid-nineteenth century. In the coming years, Americans would continue to look to the West that Jefferson opened up. They would see themselves as a chosen people destined to carry the American banner into the frontier. There they came in direct conflict with people who they never integrated into their exceptional story.

### **Manifest Destiny and the West**

The West has always captivated the American psyche. Even after the West had been fully integrated into the Union, Americans romanticized about it. Stories about frontier and movies about cowboys and Indians captured national attention. John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and portrayals of western men became pop cultural symbols of American-ness. The origin of this fascination with the west is important to trace because it reveals much about the development of America's exceptional perception. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the West a foundational to American identity. Manifest destiny inspired countless Americans to settle the unorganized western territories of the North American continent, tethering the Atlantic to the Pacific, bringing civilization with them, ever expanding the borders of the country as they went. If establishing an independent republic against long odds was America's first great mission, this would be its second.

Despite first being expressed as such in the 1840s by Democrats promoting expansion, Manifest Destiny existed as a set of latent ideas early in the colonial period. The West was the land of opportunity for colonist up and down the Atlantic seaboard. They stretched the frontier

further from the east coast in search of arable and productive farmland to cultivate. Southern colonists pursued large tracts of land to grow cash crops like tobacco, while Northern colonists sought land for subsistence farming looking to grow grains.

Time and time again, this steady stream of colonial migration west prompted conflict with the Native populations who had inhabited those regions for generations. In New England, European colonists drove nearly all the local native tribes from the area during King Phillip's War and the Pequot War. Further south into the middle colonies, native tribes formed powerful alliances, such as the Iroquois Confederacy, that kept westward migration at bay for some time. The ambition for land acquisition by European settlers directly implied the loss of land held by the natives living there.<sup>29</sup>

This struggle between Native Americans and colonists shaped the perceptions colonial Americans had of the native people. The technological superiority Europeans had over Native Americans made it easier to find success in violent clashes. Virulent novel diseases that Europeans brought with them to the Americas decimated native populations dramatically impacting their capability to ward off encroachment. In turn, colonists began to perceive this as a sign of racial superiority. To many of the American colonists, the natives were savages, uncivilized, and backwards. They lacked the social characteristics that was proof in and of itself to the colonists of their own preeminence over the native peoples. This worldview was used to justify the exploitation of native populations.<sup>30</sup>

Other colonists viewed the natives differently. They identified them with a primitive past that was innocent, noble, and pure. They represented the Edenic state of creation that God had

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<sup>29</sup> Jennings, Francis. *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

established in the first days.<sup>31</sup> These two divergent perspectives on Native Americans became symbolic stand ins for the West itself. The West was uncivilized and in need of subduing, yet simultaneously it was the untouched, pure wilderness that offered new opportunities.

Ultimately, the conflict that garnering new western land created between colonists and Native Americans was not worth the headache it caused the British Empire during the colonial period. In 1763, the Proclamation Line was created by the king and Parliament to avoid further tension. The line ran along the Appalachian Mountain ranges cordoning off the eastern colonies from the west. Despite their attempts at limiting further settlement, American colonists often ignored the Crown's dictate and crossed into the territory illegally. On the other side of the Appalachians, America's new west was calling to colonists. Ohio and the Northwest territory would be the first true frontier for an emerging manifest destiny.

David Humphreys was born in 1752 the son of a New England Protestant minister. When the War for Independence broke out, like many young men, Humphreys joined the patriot cause. His Yale education and experience early in the war proved useful to General George Washington who soon appointed him as a member of his headquarters staff. Years after the war, Humphreys was selected to be a foreign minister to Portugal and Spain by presidents Washington and Adams. During his career as a statesman, Humphreys wrote poetry that highlighted the latent ideas that developed into the manifest destiny of the mid-nineteenth century. Nested within his written work were clear expressions of exceptionalism driven by the same type of millennialism described by Jonathan Edwards and later Lyman Beecher and Charles Finney. Just and Timothy Dwight's poetry spoke to the very themes that produced America's exceptional identity, so too did Humphreys'.

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<sup>31</sup> Hughes, Richard T. and C. Leonard Allen. *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America 1630-1875*. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

“If the past is to furnish any criterion for forming a judgment of the future, we are undoubtedly destined, as a nation, to advance with large and rapid strides towards the summit of national aggrandizement.”<sup>32</sup> In introducing his poem titled “A Poem on the Future Glory of the United States of America,” Humphreys directly ties the destiny of the country to the nation; Fusing together nationalistic sentiment with the millennial ideas he echoed. The poem itself becomes even more explicit in its exceptional rhetoric.

Beyond these glooms what bright days appear,  
Where dawns on mortals heav’n’s millennial year!  
In western wilds what scenes of grandeur rise,  
As unborn ages crowd upon my eyes;  
A better area claims its destin’d birth,  
And heav’n descending dwells with man on earth.<sup>33</sup>

Humphreys’ American millennium ushering in Christ’s return was appointed by God to begin in the west. Like Dwight, who Humphreys references, he believes that if “Columbia” is to fulfill the destiny it has, her people must act.<sup>34</sup> He was particular concerned with action in regard to political causes of his day, including the challenges America faced with the Barbary pirates, but the project of establishing the west looms large alongside those issues. Humphreys hoped that “Far in the west shall freedom’s flag be reared.” From the east coast west, progress and American ingenuity will help subdue the western wilderness.

Then see strong bulwarks towns Atlantic guard,  
O’er wastes, late trackless, wide high-ways prepar’d;  
Canals protract the interminable tide,  
While loaded barks through levell’d mountains glide;  
To nameless wild new charms by culture giv’n,  
And a new city rise the type of heav’n.

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<sup>32</sup> Humphreys, David. *The Miscellaneous Works*. 1804. Found in Tuveson, Ernest. *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968). 119-121.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Humphreys. *The Miscellaneous Works*. 62.

Keen listeners today might envision John Gast's "American Progress" painted in 1872, almost seventy years after Humphreys' poem was published.<sup>35</sup> In the painting an angel is headed into the shadowy west carrying with her a schoolbook and telegraph line. In the west are fleeing herds of animals and natives trying in vain to outpace the wave of migration from the east. Coming from the east are wagon trains and pioneers leading the way for the railways, towns, and farmers following them. Humphreys had only seen the first fruits of the coming industrial revolution in his days, but his poem revealed his awareness of its role in subduing the west. But as in Gast's painting, the migration of American citizens west into the Northwest territory that captivated Humphreys would inevitably displace the native people living there.

Despite the attempts by the authors of the Northwest Ordinance to facilitate relations "good faith" with the Native people of the territory, conflict persisted.<sup>36</sup> Questionable agreements made between territorial governments and tribesmen took more and more land from the Shawnee. This culminated with the Indian Wars that took place in the midst of the War of 1812. Shawnee warrior Tecumseh created a confederacy of midwestern tribes to drive the Americans from the territory. Ultimately, Tecumseh would be killed in 1813 and so would his hopes of fending off American settlement. General William Henry Harrison's defeat of Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames would sound the death knell of a united native alliance in the Northwest territory. But it was another United States general who would experience a meteoric rise for his part in the adjacent war with the British and Native Americans in the South during the War of

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<sup>35</sup> Gast, John. "American Progress," Oil on canvas, 1872. Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, California.

<sup>36</sup> United States, Charles Thomson, United States Continental Congress, and Continental Congress Broadside Collection. *An ordinance for the government of the territory of the United States, North-west of the river Ohio*. New York: s.n, 1787. Online Text. <https://www.loc.gov/item/90898154/>.

1812 that would further contribute to America's growing exceptional identity, woven together with a continued pursuit of manifest destiny, Andrew Jackson.

Andrew Jackson remains a controversial figure in American history. His life prior to becoming the seventh president of the United States was defined by his military career. The victory he led over the British at the Battle of New Orleans propelled him to national fame. During the war he also led successful campaigns against Native tribes allied with the British in the South that would shade his views on natives. Despite eventually becoming a wealthy landowner, after the war Jackson became a hero to the common man. He worked his way out of a childhood of poverty on the frontier into the upper echelon of American society. When he entered the White House after his electoral victory in 1828, Jackson became the first president from the West beyond the Appalachian Mountains. His tenure in office would eventually be seen as a defining for the country, which had officially opened the populist era of Jacksonian Democracy.<sup>37</sup>

Jacksonian Democracy was marked by a set of core themes. It promoted a frontier egalitarianism that offered new opportunities to Americans who had not previously been able to participate in American politics. It was an era of universal white, male suffrage that pushed back against the aristocratic, upper class that had dominated the political landscape up to that point. Many of these newly enfranchised Americans were migrating west in search of their own frontier success stories. Jacksonian Democracy facilitated a new nationalism that was westward oriented, which in the end prepared the way for Jackson's manifest destiny program, Indian removal.

Throughout his first term, Jackson delivered a series of speeches that spoke about his thoughts on Indian removal. He believed that the Native tribes, particularly in the South, needed

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<sup>37</sup> Brown, David S. *The First Populist: The Defiant Life of Andrew Jackson*. (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster Inc. 2022).

to relocate west across the Mississippi River to open new settlement for Americans interested acquiring the rights to tribal lands. The Jackson administration's mission was eliminating the people in the way of continued American expansion and settlement.

Native communities within state boundaries were seen as a burden on American citizens. "Alabama will be freed from Indian occupancy and opened to a civilized population" once removal of the Chickasaws and Choctaws was complete. Similarly, after treaties in the Northwest were concluded Jackson believed the "time is not distant, it is hoped, when Ohio will be no longer embarrassed with the Indian population."<sup>38</sup> Americans were not just distinct from Natives in Jackson's mind, but they were superior to them. The priorities of white settlement and westward migration outweighed the land rights that Native tribes maintained. The Natives were "savage" and "barbaric" peoples in need of advancement into civilized life.<sup>39</sup> While the American people themselves were the one chosen by God to move humanity forward.

In his farewell address, Jackson wove together religious symbolism and his views regarding Native Americans in dramatic fashion. This text more than any other Jacksonian source demonstrates what American exceptionalism meant for wide swaths of the American public. America was a "land of blessings." The nation's special status evidenced by the very fact that it "has improved and is flourishing beyond any former example in the history of nations." Nothing would impede America from fulfilling its destiny.<sup>40</sup>

The States which had so long been retarded in their improvement by the Indian tribes residing in the midst of them are at length relieved from the evil, and this unhappy race--the original dwellers in our land--are now placed in a situation where we may well hope

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<sup>38</sup> Jackson, Andrew. "Third Annual Message to Congress." December 6, 1831. Miller Center. The University of Virginia. <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/december-6-1831-third-annual-message-congress>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Jackson, Andrew. "Farewell Address." March 4, 1837. The American Presidency Project. University of California Santa Barbara. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/farewell-address-0>

that they will share in the blessings of civilization and be saved from that degradation and destruction.

The “safety and comfort of our own citizens have been greatly promoted by their removal,” Jackson proclaimed. At last, the immediate west was opened to the continued flow of American migration. Through which, America would fulfill its God-given destiny. According to Jackson, Providence showered innumerable blessings on the country and had called the chosen people of that country to continue their mission in preserving that gift.<sup>41</sup>

The ideas at the heart of Jacksonian Democracy would not dissipate after he left office. For a moment, Democratic failures to manage an economic crisis in 1837 during Martin Van Buren’s four year in office allowed for the ascension of the anti-Jackson, Whig party in 1841. The Whig’s control over the executive would be short lived. In 1844, Jackson’s Democrats would recapture the White House when James K. Polk, a bold expansionist from Jackson’s own Tennessee was elected eleventh president of the United States. Polk had run a campaign full dedicated to the ideas articulated by a Democratic journalist named John O’Sullivan.

O’Sullivan would eventually become a foreign minister to Portugal, but it was his work as editor of *The United States Democratic Review and Magazine* that led to the first use of the term “manifest destiny.” As early as 1839, O’Sullivan was exposing American exceptionalism in relationship to national expansion. In “The Great Nation of Futurity,” an article published in his magazine that year, he argued that the United States was in fact exceptional when compared to other nations, particularly the oppressive monarchies of Europe. Similarly, America had a destiny that, for O’Sullivan, was infused with religious significance.

The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



power can. We point to the everlasting truth on the first page of our national declaration, and we proclaim to the millions of other lands, that "the gates of hell" -- the powers of aristocracy and monarchy -- "shall not prevail against it."<sup>42</sup>

Americans are the people by and through whom forward progress is gained according to O'Sullivan. With godly wisdom in mind that progress was made inevitable. O'Sullivan even goes so far as to weave Biblical metaphors into the significance of the Declaration of Independence. What he argues is perhaps some of the clearest expositions of American civic religion prior to the Civil War.

The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High -- the Sacred and the True.<sup>43</sup>

Here O'Sullivan echoes the millennial destiny in which Protestants across the United States believed deeply. The United States, by virtue of following a godly ethic, will become the city on a hill that John Winthrop had imagined two-hundred years earlier.

Despite the rich rhetoric of exceptionalism and its infusion with religious symbol, O'Sullivan's 1839 article did not directly tie those ideas to the west. Six years later when the prospect of annexing Texas and Oregon into the United States was a central political issue, O'Sullivan coined his legendary term. "Texas is now ours," O'Sullivan asserted. No nation could stand in our way of gaining it.

Other nations have undertaken to intrude themselves ... in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> O'Sullivan, John. "The Great Nation of Futurity," *The United States Democratic Review*, Volume 6, Issue 23. (New York: 1839). pp. 426-430

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> O'Sullivan, John. "Annexation," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, Volume 17. (New York: 1845). pp. 5-6, 9-10.

God has called the American people to claim North America for itself; to bridge the Atlantic and Pacific. Much like Abraham was called by God to multiply over the face of the earth, so to shall the Americans multiply over the continent. Unlike Andrew Jackson, who argued that the Native Americans were the enemy of that mission, O'Sullivan sees Mexico as America's antithesis.

The Anglo-Saxon foot is already on its borders. Already the advance guard of the irresistible army of Anglo-Saxon emigration has begun to pour down upon it, armed with the plough and the rifle, and marking its trail with schools and colleges, courts and representative halls, mills and meeting-houses. A population will soon be in actual occupation of California, over which it will be idle for Mexico to dream of dominion.<sup>45</sup>

O'Sullivan expresses the same potential for exceptionalism to create racial categories. Here he echoes most clearly Bushnell's claim that not only is America exceptional, but so too is the Anglo-Saxon race. Anglo-America's destiny and mission is to subdue and civilize the West according to O'Sullivan and many Jacksonian Democrats like President Polk.

For his part, Polk would express much of the same sentiment during his inaugural address. Polk was an ardent supporter of westward expansion and his campaign slogan "54-40 or fight" illustrated just how far he was willing to go to pursue that end. When he was sworn in on March 4, 1845 he delivered a speech that reinforced his views of the United States' manifest destiny and exceptional role in the world. He believed America was a "Heaven-favored land." Central to his message was the integration of Texas and Oregon into that special union. Texas won its independence from Mexico in 1836 and hoped to apply for US statehood, Polk was motivated to see that through. In defending this cause, Polk laid out a case for further expansion.<sup>46</sup>

As our population has expanded, the Union has been cemented and strengthened. As our boundaries have been enlarged and our agricultural population has been spread over a large surface, our federative system has acquired additional strength and security... It is

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Polk, James K. "Inaugural Address." March 4, 1845. Avalon Project. Yale Law School. [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/polok.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/polok.asp)

confidently believed that our system may be safely extended to the utmost bounds of our territorial limits, and that as it shall be extended the bonds of our Union, so far from being weakened, will become stronger.

For Polk, the expansion of the United States' borders meant increased prosperity and protection. He believed acquiring more territory will only strengthen the nation. The utmost bounds of territorial potential was not Texas' western border, but the Pacific. Polk makes a subtle case, not just for the annexation of Texas and Oregon, but California.<sup>47</sup>

In 1846, the Mexican-American War began. After the Americans routed the Mexican army, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo was signed, in which Mexico ceded land west of Texas up to and including California to the United States. With this new territory, America fulfilled its manifest destiny to overspread the continent.

Over the course of completing that task, the westward nationalism shaped by American exceptionalism drew sharp lines between insiders and outsiders. There was little room in that paradigm for the Native Americans and the Mexicans. The Americans considered themselves on a divinely ordained mission and all people standing in the way of progress were pushed off the tracks. The expansionist ideas promoted by thinkers like Humphreys and O'Sullivan were grasped on to by Presidents Jackson and Polk who ultimately actualized exceptionalism in their day, to the benefit of some at the expense of others.

### **The High Tide of Exceptionalism**

From the colonial period through the Age of Jackson American exceptionalism was mainstreamed in national culture by politicians, journalists, writers, and others engaged in American intellectual life. By the late 1830s, exceptionalism had reached its high tide. Manifest

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

destiny and Polk's Mexican American War were emblematic of that relative to the West. At the same time, other domestic issues were being approached by emergent political organizations, reformers, activists, and public intellectuals through the lens of the now fully developed exceptionalism that defined the late Antebellum period.

American was a rapidly changing place in the early nineteenth century: industrialization was changing how Americans worked, urbanization coinciding with growing industry transformed where and how people lived, a transportation revolution was closing the distance between states and the rest of the globe. These major shifts facilitated the need for reform and the possibility of it. The flaws in American society were becoming more evident to the American people in the midst of all this dynamism. Americans believed these problems could be and needed to be addressed to move the country forward. Many reformers were inspired by the evangelistic revivals of the Second Great Awakening that reinforced the idea of a millennium just around the corner and the need to pursue godliness in their lives and communities.<sup>48</sup>

Antebellum reform took many shapes. Reformers sought to create new institutions for the betterment of the society including free public education. They challenged the advance of slavery and called for its abolition. Many saw alcohol as the root cause of American social degradation and worked towards promoting temperance. These reformers sought to create a moral republic, one where their evangelical hopes for a new millennium might come to fruition. National sins prevented that possibility. Action was needed to purify the republic and combat its shortcomings. Many of the leading reformers of the Antebellum period were Protestant thinkers motivated towards these ends.<sup>49</sup> When their aims became political, attaching themselves to national, state, and local politics, it exemplified Christian republicanism. Popular movements with Protestant

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<sup>48</sup> Walters, Ronald G. *American Reformers*. 1978. 3-6.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

moral causes targeted towards the progress of society enacted through America's republican institutions.

Moral reform crusaders pursued changes *within* society, but the goals of Anglo-Protestant exceptionalism also called for the defense of American values from external forces. These reform movements often overlapped with each other and other political movements. Key national issues created a range of reform goals.

Immigration was one such issue. Millions of immigrants streamed to America from the late-1830s to the mid-1850s. They left their homes and crossed the Atlantic, and Pacific in the case of the Chinese, in response to political, economic, and agricultural crises that roiled their homelands during this period. Two of the largest groups to immigrate to the states were the Irish and Germans. The Irish had suffered a potato famine that began in 1845 leading to mass starvation and other population pressures. The Germans on the other hand came to America to escape political revolutions that swept across the German states.<sup>50</sup>

The arrival of these immigrants into the United States created political and social discord among Antebellum Americans. Nativism, the perspective that the interests of native-born Americans ought to be given priority over immigrant's interests, became a powerful force in nineteenth century politics. They believed that they were the true, rightful heirs to the United States and therefore had the certain privileges over outsiders. Nativist Americans feared that these new immigrants could upset voting order of the country and even take control of the levers of power themselves. They also were particularly opposed the immigrant's Roman Catholic faith, seeing it as antithetical to Anglo-American Protestant, republican culture.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Cohn, Raymond L. "Nativism and the End of the Mass Migration of the 1840s and 1850s." *The Journal of Economic History* 60, no. 2 (2000): 361–83

<sup>51</sup> Ritter, Luke. *Inventing America's First Immigration Crisis: Political Nativism in the Antebellum West*, 1st ed., (Fordham University Press, 2021).

Anti-Catholic discrimination and violence plagued the nation. In 1834, Boston's Ursuline Convent was burned to the ground. Protestant leaders such as Lyman Beecher railed against Catholicism in their public writings and sermons.<sup>52</sup> Riots in Philadelphia in 1844 turned bloody. Newspapers were filled with anti-Catholic sentiment and derogatory political cartoons. Certain Catholic immigrant groups were even excluded from hiring opportunities.

Eventually, nativism became the uniting idea of the American Party and the Know Nothing Party that grew in popularity into the 1850s.<sup>53</sup> These parties embodied American exceptionalism. They argued that native born Americans were distinct from European immigrants and that they ought to be given special priority within domestic politics. They believed it was their mission to defend, preserve, and save America from the corruptions of outside influence. To them America was an Anglo-Protestant republic that was under assault from "foreign aggression." The Catholic church was the bastion of "tyrannical power" under the influence of the monarchical Pope who sought to subvert American institutions.<sup>54</sup> Nativism was the "defence of Protestant rights and Protestant freedoms against Papal tyranny and Jesuit aggression," claimed American Party congressman Lewis Charles Levin during a speech opposing the placement of an American ambassador in the Holy See.<sup>55</sup>

Their platform included a twenty-one-year waiting period for immigrants to gain the franchise. Nativists wanted limits on the influx of immigrants into America were demanded and Protestant educational policy was advocated for to combat Catholic education. They firmly believed that if Americans took up the call to national self-defense against "alien interference"

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<sup>52</sup> Beecher, Lyman. *A Plea for the West*. 1835.

<sup>53</sup> Ritter, Luke. *Inventing America's First Immigration Crisis*. 148.

<sup>54</sup> *Proceedings of the Native American State Convention*. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. February 22, 1845. Published by the State Library of Pennsylvania.

<sup>55</sup> Levin, Lewis C. "Speech on the Proposed Mission to Rome." Delivered in the House of Representatives of the United States. March 2, 1848.

that then “the glory of our native land [would] spread wide over the Universe, proclaiming it truly to be a blest Asylum.”<sup>56</sup> Here one can see the convergence of Winthrop’s “city on a hill” metaphor, with echoes of millennial and covenantal theology. If the chosen people preserve their country against a corrupt, sinful enemy the glory of the nation will emanate to the rest of the world.

This confluence of themes was not restricted to reform or political movements during the Antebellum period; it was also being applied within the academic domain. Nearly fifty years after the Declaration was signed by the Second Continental Congress in 1776, George Bancroft began publishing his comprehensive history of the United States. Bancroft was born in New England at the turn of the nineteenth century and he was trained at Harvard in divinity before traveling to Europe to further his studies in theology and philosophy. Writing was his passion, and he was particularly drawn to American history. Into adulthood, Bancroft was engaged in Democratic politics serving in multiple bureaucratic roles during the Van Buren and Polk administrations before becoming a foreign minister to Britain, Prussia, and Germany later in his career. His *History of the United States from the Discovery of the Continent* was a monumental achievement. In it, Bancroft presents a version of American history molded by divine providence and American exceptionalism.

The entire work was published over four decades, but his earliest volume reveals his perception of American history during late 1830s. The central focus of Bancroft’s first volume was the colonial period, but he introduces the work with his exceptionalist paradigm. It opens with what reads as America’s nineteenth century trophy case.

While the nations of Europe aspire after change, our constitution engages the fond admiration of the people by which it has been established. Prosperity follows the

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<sup>56</sup> *Proceedings of the Native American State Convention held at Harrisburg, February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1845.* (Philadelphia: William F. Geddes, 1845). Retrieved from [https://archive.org/details/proceedingsofnat00amer\\_1/](https://archive.org/details/proceedingsofnat00amer_1/)

execution of even justice; invention is quickened by the freedom of competition; and labor rewarded with sure and unexampled returns.<sup>57</sup>

Like the revolutionaries before him, Bancroft argues that the United States is distinct from Europe in its principles of government. Unlike Europe “we avoid entangling” in foreign wars. All of the United States’ achievements that Bancroft describes might remind his readers of utopia.

And yet it is but little more than two centuries, since the oldest of our states received its first permanent colony. Before that time the whole territory was an unproductive waste. Throughout its wide extent the arts had not erected a monument. Its only inhabitants were a few scattered tribes of feeble barbarians, destitute of commerce and political connection.<sup>58</sup>

Not only were the American people different than Europeans according to Bancroft, but that they, unlike the native peoples of this land, successfully brought civilization to the land. He clearly meant to juxtapose the American citizens into a place of superiority relative to the Native Americans.

Intelligence is diffused with unparalleled universality... There are more daily journals in the United States than in the world beside... Other governments are convulsed by the innovations and reforms of neighboring states; our constitution... neutralizes the influence of foreign principles.<sup>59</sup>

He asserts American superiority, but broadens out his scope to the rest of the world. Bancroft undoubtedly sees the United States as a chosen place, proving its special status in its unequaled achievements. He closes his introduction by tying his exceptional vision of America to God’s will in the same way an Edwardsean Calvinist might have done one-hundred years earlier.

It is the object of the present work to explain how the change of condition of our land has been accomplished; and, as the fortunes of a nation are not under control of blind destiny, to follow the steps by which a favoring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country to its present happiness and glory.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Bancroft, George. *History of the United States: From the Discovery of the American Continent*. (Boston, MA: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1848). Vol. 1. 1

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 4.



Bancroft asserted that the glory of the United States was destined by God. Its republican values were foreordained for a time and place as a part of some divine plan. This is Protestant exceptionalism writ large.

What Bancroft could not have foreseen when his first volume was published in 1834 was the coming crisis that threatened to undermine his exceptional worldview. Enslavement had loomed large over American history dating back to 1619 when the first African slave arrived in North America. In Antebellum America it was the most salient issue on the political and cultural front. While much can be said about slavery and American exceptionalism, it deserves being fleshed out far more than is capable of being done here.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, the issue of slavery itself and sectional tension created by it, threatened to end the American project. Even as early as 1838 this was evident to astute observers.

When abolitionist publisher Elijah Lovejoy was killed by a pro-slavery mob in 1837, a young Abraham Lincoln saw the threat that lawlessness motivated by the slavery debate was to the union. In 1838, he delivered a speech addressing the violence and in it he expressed his own exceptional perspective of America that he believed was barreling towards crisis.

We find ourselves in the peaceful possession, of the fairest portion of the earth, as regards extent of territory, fertility of soil, and salubrity of climate. We find ourselves under the government of a system of political institutions, conducing more essentially to the ends of civil and religious liberty, than any of which the history of former times tells us.<sup>62</sup>

Lincoln's conception of American exceptionalism was not unique. The United States was exceptional as a place and an institution. No foreign army could conquer it. The true threat to

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<sup>61</sup>For interesting reflections on this topic one might look to Cormier, Travis. "American Exceptionalism and the Antebellum Slavery Debate." 2014. *Theses and Dissertations*. 1524. and Lang, Andrew F. *A Contest of Civilizations: Exposing the Crisis of American Exceptionalism in the Civil War Era*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

<sup>62</sup> Address by Abraham Lincoln before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois as it appeared in the *Sangamo Journal*, February 3, 1838. Reprinted from Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 8 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 1:108–115.

American glory was not external, but rather internal. Only the American people themselves could ever destroy what the founders had created, and it appeared to Lincoln that lawlessness, particularly over the issue of slavery, might open the door to national suicide.<sup>63</sup>

If there was any hope of preserving the exceptional nation, it would be through the adherence to a “political religion” through which every American would swear a sacred covenant to abide by the Constitution and the laws of the country. In the end, slavery would tear the nation in two and the high tide of American exceptionalism seen in the missions of the reformers, the divisive rhetoric of the nativists, and Bancroft’s history of America would recede during the Civil War. American exceptionalism and the Protestant ideas that intersected with it would need reassessed in its wake. How could a chosen people, guided by God engage in such a bloody brutal war? Was the millennium really at hand and could flawed people bring it about? Was this country destined for greatness? How different were Americans from the warring Europeans? Was the war a product of a broken covenant? Ultimately, these and other questions like this dramatically reshaped the paradigm of national identity and Protestant Christianity in the United States; momentarily collapsing a worldview that had been forged over decades.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

Ideas are powerful things. History is shaped by people with ideas. They can stir individuals and groups to action in dramatic ways. Ideas that are particularly potent in so far as they are ascribed to by large numbers of people who act in accord with them are among the most important to examine in the past and present. Where did the idea come from? Why do people adopt them? How do people who adhere to those ideas act? Why are they inspired to action? These are not trivial questions. American exceptionalism was and remains one of those powerful ideas. For that reason, investigating its origins, the way it was communicated, who interacted with it, and to what ends people acted in accordance with it, ought to be important to the historian. This research begins to answer some of those questions.

Today in the United States, opinions on American exceptionalism are conflicting. Many Americans still maintain that their country is exceptional. They believe that the United States stands above all other countries in its greatness, and some still argue that America has a divinely ordained role in human history. Others argue the opposite stance, countering any exceptional claims.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, there is another approach that attacks the traditional view of American exceptionalism by highlighting the country's exceptional flaws.<sup>2</sup> As with most things in contemporary politics, Americans are deeply divided over their views on American exceptionalism. This division is uniquely important to consider because unlike debates over taxes, climate change, and gun control, the debate over American exceptionalism speaks more to identity than policy. It is one thing to disagree about domestic and foreign policy, and another to

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<sup>1</sup> Schaeffer, Kathrine. "On July Fourth, how Americans see their country and their democracy." Pew Research Center. Washington, DC. (June 30, 2022). <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/06/30/how-americans-see-their-country-and-their-democracy/>; "Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack?" PRRI. (November 1, 2021). <https://www.prrri.org/research/competing-visions-of-america-an-evolving-identity-or-a-culture-under-attack/>

<sup>2</sup> Harris, Taylor. "America Insists It Is Great. It Should Work on Being Decent." TIME. (July 2, 2022). <https://time.com/6190395/american-exceptionalism-guns-essay/>

disagree about the fundamental nature of who Americans are and what the United States is. Those divisions can cut deep. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the intricacies of the worldviews that are contending with one another for the national narrative.

For its part, this project examined a link between Protestantism and American exceptionalism that seems to have endured. Evangelical Americans and Protestant Americans more broadly make up a large part of the conservative base in America. Conservatives, a substantial number of whom are in fact Protestant, maintain exceptionalist beliefs far more than other demographics.<sup>3</sup> Exploring further the reasons for that connection today, and in the recent past, might contribute to important explanations for that relationship, but religious factors are surely at the heart of what is taking place. It is evident that very early on in American history Protestantism intersected with American exceptionalism.

American exceptionalism was woven together with Protestant Christianity in the early republic. It had particular buying power withing Anglo-American, Protestant communities and was expressed very early on by Protestant leaders. Exceptionalism was communicated through a nexus of Protestant themes, symbols, and ideas even by those outside the traditional boundaries of religion. Covenental theology, Christian perfectionism, and millennialism lent to a culture concerned with being set apart or distinct, the notion of being called by God or chosen by God for a special reason, and a mission-oriented approach to their individual and social lives. The core ideas that comprised American exceptionalism overlapped with those Protestant ideas: the distinction of America, the United States, and Americans from the rest of the world, the special status that came with, and the missional response it preempted.

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<sup>3</sup> “Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack?” PRRI. (November 1, 2021).; Schaeffer, Kathrine. “On July Fourth, how Americans see their country and their democracy.” Pew Research Center. Washington, DC. (June 30, 2022).; “Religious Landscape Study.” Pew Research Center. Washington DC. (2014). <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/>

The language used by Protestant leaders and secular, political actors during the late-eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries reveals the rhetorical, symbolic, and thematic intersection between Protestant Christianity and American exceptionalism. Dating back to the colonial period Protestants saw America as a place with a God given destiny. Protestant leaders during the American Revolution and early republican period that followed including Timothy Dwight IV, Lyman Beecher, and Horace Bushnell articulated American exceptionalism explicitly in their written work. It undergirded their belief that America and its people held a special place in the world and inspired Protestant social reforms that would evidence that fact and, perhaps, bring about the new millennium.

Similarly, political and secular leaders employed the same themes in their own expressions of exceptionalism. Revolutionaries used religious motifs and symbols to stimulate the separation of Britain and the American colonies. The republicans who participated in the formation of the United States' government made exceptionalism into a programmatic political mission. As Americans followed in the footsteps of that program, their eyes were fixed to the west. Presidents Andrew Jackson and James K. Polk drew on John O'Sullivan's exceptionalist notion of manifest destiny in their own day in their push to expand the country and the reach of the American people. Reformers, political activists, and academics used American exceptionalism in the nineteenth century to address complex social issues from immigration to slavery. During that time George Bancroft wrote his history of the Americas which was shaped by his own exceptional paradigm. When the language and rhetoric of Protestants and secular public figures during the early is examined carefully together the intersection between Protestant thought and American exceptionalism could not be more clear.

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