



AMERICA THE GOOD

Manichean Discourse in Major Events in American History

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the role of Manichean discourse in American foreign policy. A literature study was performed where the theory of Manichean discourse, the concepts of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny, case studies of international conflicts where the theory of Manichean discourse could be applied, and the implications of the use of this discourse for the image of the United States were examined. Presidents and administrations have used the idea of Manichean discourse to their benefit on multiple occasions in national and international affairs. The binary distinction has been used to justify interventions by the United States in international conflicts.

Keywords:

Manichean discourse, binary discourse, American exceptionalism, manifest destiny, international relations

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Introduction

The United States has been a significant global power for many decades. The country has positioned itself in international relations as a force to be reckoned with, often intervening in international conflicts under the guise of bringing democracy to nations in need. To convince other countries of the need for their interventions, the United States has often painted a very grim picture of its adversaries. Multiple times in recent history, an American president has spoken of an evil enemy that must be defeated at all costs. Manichean discourse, or the binary distinction of good versus evil, has been around for centuries, long before the United States as we know it was founded. While many different theories interpret foreign policies of the United States, Manichean discourse is a specifically interesting theory to apply to the United States as it is not only visible in international relations but is also evident in presidential rhetoric and has an impact on domestic relations. This research is focused on how the United States has often portrayed itself as the “good” in both international and also national historical events, compared to an “evil” enemy.

Not much research has been done in the field of Manichean discourse concerning specific events in American history. Most research has focused on rhetoric in speeches by political figures, not on how Manichean discourse influences the American psyche in a similar way to the notion of American exceptionalism, which has received much more attention from scholars. The use of Manichean discourse for this topic is interesting as it gives a broader perspective on the United States and international relations. The binary discourse is globally applicable and is therefore relevant to comparisons with other countries. The terms ‘American exceptionalism’ and ‘city upon a hill’ have been coined specially for the United States and have been researched quite extensively. However, the more generally applicable notion of Manichean discourse has not been put into context with the United States as much.

The research question of this thesis is: “How has the United States portrayed itself as the “good” compared to an “evil” enemy in historical events, and how has this influenced its position in national and international relations?” This thesis hypothesizes that Manichean discourse is deeply embedded in the United States’ being and that this discourse has led the United States to position itself as the “good” in opposition to the “evil” in major global events. Their positioning as being good has played a role in the reasoning behind interventions in major international conflicts. The United States has used the confronting of evil as a justification for its interference in multiple global conflicts.

Firstly, this research will consist of a literature review of articles related to Manichean discourse, American exceptionalism, the United States as a shining city upon a hill, and the binary distinction of good and evil in major historical events. Secondly, this research will review multiple case studies to highlight the instances of Manichean discourse in American history. The case studies are focused on both national and international historical events where the United States possibly actively placed itself in the role of the “good”. Thirdly, this research will reflect on the repercussions of the positioning of the United States as a force of good on both a domestic as well as an international level.

Method

Multiple search engines were used to conduct this research. Used search engines included the Radboud University online library, JStor, Google Scholar, and Google.

Different terms were used to receive articles through the abovementioned search engines. Abstracts of articles were read to determine the relevance of the study. Studies that were deemed not relevant or not useful were omitted. Only studies written in Dutch or English were used. The term 'Manichean discourse' was first entered for an abstract search with 'article/chapter' and 'last 10 years' as specifications. 114 results were found. Later, the term 'discourse' was omitted to broaden the search. 592 results were found. The relevance of the first 10 articles was reviewed based on their titles and abstracts. Articles with a focus on Manichean discourse but also on specific nations other than the United States and with a focus on specific historical events than those relevant for the case studies of this paper were excluded. Second, the term 'United States evil' was entered. 5,222 results were found. Literature on topics other than international relations was omitted. A keyword search proved less useful than searching through the references of already acquired articles as the keywords were easily too specific or too broad to find the right articles. Therefore, most of the literature used, was found in the references of articles used or received through third parties. The article by Caroline Kennedy called *The Manichean Temptation* was used as a leading reference. Multiple articles used for this study were found in the references of the article by Kennedy.

Chapter 1

Manichean discourse, American exceptionalism, and manifest destiny

The concept of Manichean discourse stems from the religion founded by prophet Mani in the Persian Empire around the third century (Daghrir 25). Manichaeism follows the belief that the world is divided into good versus evil. This dualistic approach has drawn large numbers of followers for centuries partly due to its simplicity and moral clarity (May). The central claim of the Manichean religion was that the world could be separated into two opposing spheres corresponding with God and Satan in the eternal world, with all the conflicts in the human world stemming from the clashes between the forces of Good and the forces of Evil (Daghrir 25).

The concept of Manichean discourse has also found its way into politics and policy, scholars argue. Dr. Wassim Daghrir, professor at the department of English at Sousse University, states that several American presidents have adopted the Manichean rhetoric in their speeches on American foreign policy (25). When following Manichean discourse, the world is a global arena where conflicts between forces of Good and forces of Evil arise, and the United States is called upon to defend the Good (Daghrir 25). The forces of Evil are the enemy, which must be identified clearly, but cannot be compromised with, contained, or ignored (Daghrir 25). The enemy must be hated and destroyed. Polarization takes place, with the distinction between “us”, or the Good, versus “them”, the Evil. Achieving this polarizing image where the United States takes on the role of the Good is aided by both the concept of American exceptionalism as well as manifest destiny.

American exceptionalism is the belief that the United States is fundamentally different from other nations. Those who stand behind the idea argue that the United States has a historical development unique to human history, with a distinct political system and values. Those who propose American exceptionalism have implied that the United States, through its

distinctiveness, is entitled and destined to become a definite and positive player on the world stage. According to Seymour Martin Lipset, a political scientist, the background of the notion of American exceptionalism can be found in the American Revolution, where the United States emerged as a new nation, different from those in the old world. The principles of the Declaration of Independence; life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the equality principles and democracy that the new United States represented can all be referred to as American exceptionalism. These principles make that the United States could be perceived as superior to other nations and with that having the responsibility of the unique mission to transform or save the world. American exceptionalism is a core component of the understanding Americans have of themselves as a nation and has strong ties to American nationalism (Britton 128). The mission of the United States to spread its values throughout the world is pure, as its virtuousness is asserted by the belief that American power is naturally good. As Britton argues, this inherently good power also leads to the proliferation of freedom and democracy (128).

Alexis de Tocqueville, the French political scientist and historian, described the United States as exceptional after his travels to the country in 1831. In his work *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville writes:

“The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one. Their strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusively commercial habits, even the country they inhabit, which seems to divert their minds from the pursuit of science, literature, and the arts, the proximity of Europe, which allows them to neglect these pursuits without relapsing into barbarism, a thousand special causes, of which I have only been able to point out the most important, have singularly concurred to fix the mind of the American upon purely practical objects. His passions, his wants, his education, and everything about him seem to unite in drawing the natives of the United States earthward; his religion alone bids

him turn, from time to time, a transient and distracted glance to heaven. Let us cease, then, to view all democratic nations under the example of the American people.” (De Tocqueville).

De Tocqueville specifically notes how other nations should take note of the American people and their democracy. This notion ties in with John Winthrop’s “City Upon a Hill” sermon of 1630, which, while at the time not meant as an encouragement for the Puritans to go forth and conquer but rather be aware of the visibility of the actions to the rest of the world, later became reinterpreted as the incentive for the United States to act as a bearer of superior principles to the rest of the world (Wilkie). The conviction of superiority also left its mark on the manner with which the Americans expanded their territory on their own continent. In the 19th century, the widely held belief of manifest destiny saw American settlers expand their terrain further to the west. There were three basic themes to manifest destiny, the first tying in with the notion of American exceptionalism; namely that the American people and their institutions held special virtues (Miller 125). The second theme was that the American people had a mission to redeem and remake the world's image of the United States (Viala-Gaudefroy 2). The third theme was that the Americans were destined under God to do this (Miller 125). This last theme stems from the belief that the foundation of the United States was directly influenced by God, with the Puritans establishing a more divine nation than those nations in the old world. It can be argued that the binary distinction of Manichean discourse is applicable here, as aligning the United States with the direct influence of God positions the nation and its people within the sphere of the “Good”.

While the term manifest destiny was coined in the 19th century referring to the expansion of the territories to the west of the American continent, some scholars have argued that it is still an incentive for United States foreign policy decisions such as the interventions in the Middle East (Von Hippel 1). With no frontier left to be conquered on their own continent, the United States

looked to further expand under the guise of bringing democracy and nation-building as the leader of the Free World. Caroline Kennedy, Professor of International Relations and International Security at Loughborough University, reiterates this argument in her paper *The Manichean temptation: Moralizing rhetoric and the invocation of evil in US foreign policy*, where she states that the United States is often tempted to ‘moralize’ its relations with other nations and tries to rationalize its own actions and foreign policies by demonizing its opponents, in line with Manichean discourse. The temptation of seeing everything along the lines of Manichean discourse comes with many assumptions about an evil enemy, which in turn can lead to policies that evoke aggravated and sometimes unnecessary suffering. According to Daghrir, political leaders who act as a force of good against evil according to Manichean discourse leave no room for doubt or regret in their actions or policies as this binary dualism offers a sense of moral certitude (28). This possible false sense of moral certainty can disguise the implications of actions undertaken by the United States in foreign policy (Dovi 101). Kennedy argues that two historical trends are at the basis of the inclination to view adversaries of the United States as the opposition of good itself (626). The first one is the gradual growth of American imperialism, which includes the westward expansion on the American continent but also later on the search for a ‘new frontier’ which involved multiple smaller wars which were fought during the nineteenth century and the eventual acquisition of the Philippines in 1898 (Kennedy 626). The acquisition of lands beyond the original frontier needed a justification, which came in the form of the binary discourse where the United States acted as a form of good in the world. The second historical trend discussed by Kennedy is the rise of the United States to a great power status in the world. This great power status did not come without responsibilities and the involvement of the United States in foreign affairs around the globe grew immensely in the twentieth century. Within the realism paradigm, the response of the United States to its new power status involves an emphasis on power, interest, conciliation,

compromise, a balance of power, and different spheres of interest (Kennedy 626). Within a more idealist paradigm, however, the United States applied itself as the indispensable nation which would make the world safe for democracy as the agent of the global common good (Kennedy 626). Through this approach, the Manichean discourse where any opposition of the United States would immediately become 'evil' becomes apparent.

Much of the United States' approach to foreign policy can be explained along the lines of binary discourse. As the average American holds diminutive interest in or understanding of foreign affairs, a binary discourse where the other party is demonized and reduced to an evil force can simplify complex events which help sell American citizens on otherwise possibly unacceptable policies (Daghrir 28). Presenting foreign policies in a binary construction creates a false dilemma with a limited worldview, which will make American citizens feel forced to choose between two options when, in reality, the choices are much broader (Daghrir 29). Displaying foreign policy dilemmas as a battle between good and evil will much easier grab the attention and the approval of the public in the United States. It removes the complexity of the situation, superseding it with a more easily accessible question of morality and identity (Daghrir 29). A 2021 Pew Research poll found that around 8 percent of Americans believe that bad things happen in life because there is evil in the world. It can be argued that many Americans are susceptible to binary discourse with a distinction between good and evil. Political leaders in the United States have often adopted language in line with the Manichean discourse to justify specific actions and persuade citizens of the necessity of engagements in or with foreign countries. Daghrir states that certain controversial engagements or actions with little or nothing to do with the concern of a battle between good and evil can nonetheless be justified by Manichean rhetoric (29). The framing of foreign policy issues in a binary manner can manipulate public opinion. It can make it seem as if foreign engagements are necessary for the defense of the Good, which symbolizes the homeland. Public support for actions deemed

essential in foreign affairs can be easily mobilized through the good versus evil rhetoric, where it also becomes “us” versus “them”. The latter binary opposition also plays an essential role in bringing together the nation to support key issues in foreign policy. According to Daghrir (26), the binary rhetoric used in Manichean discourse shows four generic features: (1) An appeal to a legitimate power source that is external to the orator and presented as inherently Good. (2) An appeal to the historical importance of the culture in which the discourse is located. (3) The construction of a thoroughly evil other. (4) A unifying construct (religious, racial, political, philosophical, or nationalistic) that appeals for unification. In this chapter, multiple case studies are discussed which follow the features of Manichean discourse. According to Daghrir, Manichean discourse serves a specific purpose in political communication (25). He states:

“Indeed, usage of binary communications as a means to unite groups against an enemy or in favor of a policy has been a recurring strategy in modern politics. Based on simple, unsophisticated, and often-misleading perceptions, the discourse rooted in Good and Evil offers a public relations device – actually a mass deception device- meant to prepare the American people psychologically for such extensive, continuing and unforeseen overseas commitments, such as the Containment of Communism and the War on Terrorism. In an almost pavlovian way, the binary discourse manufactures retaliatory feelings and heats up war fever among the masses.” (29).

Chapter 2

Case studies of the twentieth and twenty-first century

The United States has had a tendency to see itself as a beacon of light in an otherwise problematic world, at least since the Civil War (Kennedy 626). As mentioned earlier, this belief can even be traced back to the Puritan experience where the newfound country was to be seen as a 'city upon a hill' to which others would look up. However, the invocation of "evil" as an adversary has explicitly become a part of American foreign policy ever since the twentieth century and has since marked much of the policies. In the following case studies, it becomes evident that the use of Manichean discourse is in fact a recurring strategy in instances of international conflict where opinions could possibly be divided. President Reagan famously called the Cold War a struggle against the "Evil Empire" of the Soviets, and President Bush spoke of the "Axis of Evil" in his justifications for the wars in the Middle East in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. As Robert Ivie argues,

"Americans traditionally have exonerated themselves of any guilt for war by decivilizing the image of their adversaries. This 'victimage ritual,' enacted with generic regularity, has...legitimized total victory over a foe who is totally uncivilized and therefore perfectly evil." (Coe et al., 234).

The American tendency to see itself as the beacon of light that will alleviate the rest of the world can also be viewed as a paternalistic outlook where the United States feels obligated to take care of the rest of the world (Layne & Schwarz 19). This tendency or outlook comes from a core belief that the United States is innately more virtuous and righteous than other countries (Kennedy 626). The Second World War offered a perfect case for the United States to apply itself as the vindicator regarding international morality. President Roosevelt justified America's meddling in the war as a struggle where not only the interests of the United States would be taken into consideration, but all the world would benefit. The American interference would

benefit the good of the world. The interests of the United States would also be presented as identical to the interests of the free world, a world to which the United States would serve as the almighty model. President Truman expressed that the United States had a feeling of duty towards the civilized world in a 1945 speech (Daghrir 28). According to Truman, the United States should “take the lead in running the world the way it should be run” (Daghrir 28). Again, here the messiah-like rhetoric of the United States becomes clear, as the United States would not only defend its own freedom but also serve as a defender of freedom across the globe. In a 1940 speech by President Roosevelt, the need for the United States to join the war is reiterated:

“The Nazi masters of Germany have made it clear that they intend not only to dominate all life and thought in their own country, but also to enslave the whole of Europe, and then to use the resources of Europe to dominate the rest of the world. It was only three weeks ago that their leader stated this: ‘There are two worlds that stand opposed to each other.’ And then in defiant reply to his opponents he said this: ‘Others are correct when they say: ‘With this world we cannot ever reconcile ourselves.’ . . . I can beat any other power in the world.’ So said the leader of the Nazis. In other words, the Axis not merely admits but the Axis proclaims that there can be no ultimate peace between their philosophy-their philosophy of government- and our philosophy of government [...]. Let us no longer blind ourselves to the undeniable fact that the evil forces which have crushed and undermined and corrupted so many others are already within our own gates [...]. We have no excuse for defeatism. We have every good reason for hope- hope for peace, yes, and hope for the defense of our civilization and for the building of a better civilization in the future.” (Daghrir 31).

Roosevelt invoked the notion of Evil forces that had to be defeated as they were threatening the freedom and future of the American civilization. To defend that freedom, drastic measures were necessary, and to defend those extreme measures, a compelling narrative had to be invoked on

the people. Even though the use of nuclear weapons in general but especially on people had troubled many to a point where they petitioned the president in July of 1945 not to do so, the United States administration had buried any objections early in the atomic period (Kennedy 629). Near the end of the Second World War, President Truman and his administration justified the killings of Japanese citizens on a mass scale by claiming the use of the new technology would save large numbers of American lives. Through this argumentation, using nuclear weapons on civilians in a foreign country became mandated by the need to protect American citizens. The other option, Operation Olympic, was the invasion of the Japanese mainland to compel surrender. If this operation became a reality, it was estimated that over a million American troops would not survive (Kennedy 629). Destruction of the “other” was necessary to save the Americans. Over the years, President Truman would use expanding numbers to explain how many American lives were saved by the choice to attack Hiroshima and Nagasaki with nuclear weapons (Kennedy 629). Another narrative used to argue for the use of atomic weapons was the character of the Japanese regime, which according to the Americans was an evil people who simply would not surrender (Kennedy 629). They would fight to the bitter end, at great cost to the Americans. The option of occupying Japan would claim many more Japanese lives than the bombing, so another argument was that the United States was actually doing the Japanese people a service, as the United States would inevitably come out as the victor in the conflict. However, bloodshed was inescapable, and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki became the first of many international conflicts where American administrations would have to calculate how much loss was acceptable in the confrontations where the United States felt a need to intervene.

The intervention at the end of the Second World War had partially been driven by a need to expel evil forces from the world but paradoxically issued in an era with a new “evil” opponent for the Americans. The United States had accepted the division of Europe at the end

of the war, which increased the number of authoritarian states and subjugated millions of people to communism, even though President Truman claimed that the Marshall Plan had saved many countries from the evil that was communism (Kennedy 628). Geographically, the “evil” had spread, and the threat felt even closer. Hiroshima and Nagasaki had proven that the provoking of the United States would be followed by a huge and possibly disproportionate response, but the United States also confirmed that any response would be justified by the evil nature of the attacker. Philosopher Hannah Arendt predicted that “the problem of evil would be the fundamental question of post-war intellectual life in Europe after the horrors of the Second World War” (Kennedy 625). However, concern with evil mostly died out in general Western political thought after the war. In March of 1947, President Truman announced his new key foreign policy plan, which would define the American foreign policy in the eras following the Second World War. Truman needed support from the American people for his new policies. He understood that his doctrine required to not only commit to the American beliefs of freedom and individual liberties but also needed to scare the Americans into support. The Truman Doctrine was based on a grave exaggeration of the threat the Soviet Union posed. The fear of the American people of that threat would be exploited for the backing of what was essentially the declaration of the Cold War. This declaration would define the balance of power in the international sphere for decades (Daghrir 29). President Truman’s speech to Congress in March of 1947 relied heavily on religious-moral connotations, where he reiterated that nations would have to choose between the way of life the United States represented or the one represented by the Soviet Union (Daghrir 26). There was no in-between, as the conviction of Truman was that the entire system of international politics was dominated by the clash of the two opposing systems of capitalism and communism. According to President Truman, the risks posed by communism were no less threatening to American society than the threat posed by the Nazi regime. The Nazis had been an implausible force of evil to the Americans, and even though

new opponents after the war, such as the Soviet Union and communist China, were not as easily without a doubt categorized as such, they were still assumed to be evil.

As Kennedy states in her article, the Cold War was sustained by a particular view of the Soviet Union and its politics (627). This view might have been partial and possibly inaccurate, but it did its job of securing the Soviet Union as the evil opponent. Soviet politics were also seen as unnatural and ungodly in contrast to the American system, dovetailed with natural law and divine providence (Kennedy 627). In his 1960 book *The Conscience of a Conservative*, Barry Goldwater wrote about the mission of the United States to oppose the Evil Empire. Communism was evil, and all actions by the United States to counter that evil system were justified by the binary discourse where the United States automatically became the Good (Kennedy 627).

The events at the end of World War II had proven that the United States could prevail against the evil threat of fascism and communism, but as the Soviet Union also obtained nuclear weapons in the 1950s, the United States lost its upper hand. During the Cold War, the United States constantly had to echo its foundations for the looming war. An important argument remained the idea that America was the force of good in the world that would bring prosperity to other nations, which President Kennedy once again reiterated during his State of the Union speech of 1962, where he declared:

“People everywhere look to us – not to our wealth or power, but to the splendor of our ideals. For our nation is commissioned by history to be either an observer of freedom’s failure or the cause of its success.” (Daghrir 28).

Twenty years later, President Ronald Reagan used the same binary discourse when he referred to the Soviet Union as an “Evil Empire”. With this rhetoric, Daghrir states, Reagan made the tacit concept of Global Manichaeism explicit (25). This concept had long dominated the Cold War. Through Global Manichaeism, the world would be divided through a bipolar struggle

where the Soviet Union would be characterized as Evil, inevitably assigning the opposite identity of Good to the United States. Reagan's words implied the existence of a tangible Manichaeian paradigm. Dagherir writes:

“In this same vein, President Reagan told the people of West Berlin in June 1982 that theirs was ‘a meeting place of light and shadow, tyranny, and freedom. To be here is truly to stand on freedom’s edge and in the shadow of a wall that has come to symbolize all that is darkest in the world today, to sense how shining and priceless and how much in need of constant vigilance and protection our legacy of liberty is’. In Reagan’s words, ‘the forces of good’ must ultimately rally if they are to ‘triumph over evil’. The ‘great civilized ideas’ of ‘individual liberty, representative government, and the rule of law under God’ are ‘menaced’ by an ‘evil neighbor’. Communism, like Fascism, has glorified ‘the arbitrary power of the state’ while denying ‘the existence of God’ and ‘those God-given liberties that are the inalienable right of each person on this planet’. There is a ‘totalitarian evil’, an ‘ideology...without God’.” (Dagherir 26 – 27)

President Reagan's words do not shy away from comparing the Soviet Union and communism to evilness. Invoking God in his speech also reiterates the American belief that the United States was destined to guide the rest of the world to be like themselves, referring to the notions of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny. Historian Arthur Schlesinger echoes this argument in his paragraph on the “Evil Empire” speech of President Reagan. Schlesinger draws on the religious statements of the president, as well as how he proclaims that there is no negotiating with evil, which thereby justifies the use of any means necessary to defeat evil. This last argument can also clearly be seen in the Bush administration's policies in the war on terror. Schlesinger writes:

“The Soviet Union, Mr. Reagan has proclaimed, is an ‘evil empire,’ ‘the focus of evil in the modern world.’ Everything follows by deductive logic from this premise. The

world struggle is 'between right and wrong and good and evil.' When there is evil loose in the world, 'we are enjoined by scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might.' Negotiation with evil is futile if not dangerous. The Soviet Union is forever deceitful and treacherous. The Soviet leaders erect lying and cheating into a philosophy and are personally responsible for the world's manifold ills. 'Let us not delude ourselves,' Mr. Reagan has said. 'The Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on. If they weren't engaged in this game of dominos, there wouldn't be any hot spots in the world.' Not content with the orchestration of crisis in the Third World, the Soviet Union, once it acquires a certain margin of numerical superiority in warheads, can well be expected to launch a surprise nuclear attack on American targets. Safety lies only in the establishment of unequivocal military dominance by the United States, including a first-strike capability. If this means a nuclear arms race, that is Moscow's fault, not Washington's, because America's heart is pure. In any event nuclear weapons are usable and nuclear wars are winnable. We shall prevail.'” (5).

The end of the Cold War did not entail the end of Global Manicheanism, although the evil forces changed form. On September 11, 2001, the United States was attacked on its own soil. George W. Bush had only just become president, but his presidency had already been marked. The binary struggle of good versus evil in which America had become embroiled would become the predominant theme of his presidency. The Bush administration would use Manichean discourse repeatedly to defend and justify many of their controversial actions. Nine days after the attacks, Bush addressed a joint session of Congress where he made clear that America was now in conflict with evil forces and that there was no in-between. Everyone had to decide if they were with “us” i.e., the United States, or with the terrorists. In his 2002 State of the Union speech, President Bush emphasized that the challenge the United States faced was one of a dualistic nature. Bush made clear that the main focus of foreign policy would be to combat the

threats posed by the new axis of evil threatening the world (Daghrir 26). The use of the word axis would refer to the reign of Hitler and his allies, with Bush underlining that America once again faced a larger group of enemies, not an isolated one. This enemy was not just antagonistic but purely evil. These evil forces were intent on eradicating the United States. On the evil forces, Bush would state:

“Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree. [...] We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name. By confronting evil and lawless regimes, we do not create a problem, we reveal a problem. And we will lead the world in opposing it.” (Daghrir 26).

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, talks and debates about evil were brought to the forefront of policy talks both in the United States and abroad. Not only the acts of evil forces were discussed, but also the justifiable responses to these actions. Foreign policy in the post-9/11 era was more a struggle about values than interests. The religious nature of the attacks was brought up in discussions about an inevitable clash of civilizations. Much of the language routinely used in the ‘war on terror’ referred to the ideological background of the battle between the United States and the terrorists. The addition of religious rhetoric in domestic and foreign politics added substantial emotional power to the discourse of ‘evil (Kennedy 630). President Bush argued that the war on terror was a war to “save civilization itself”. President Bush spoke about evil in more than 300 speeches in the first two years of his presidency (Kennedy 630). To President Bush, Evil was an explicit force in the world that existed in a paradigmatic relationship with Good. The war on terror placed the United States and its allies on a binary distinction with their enemies. Through this binary distinction, all actions perpetrated by ‘the good’ were justified in the war against evil. However, by making the defeat of evil such an essential part of foreign policy, a new type of terror and anxiety was brought to the American homeland (Kennedy 631).

The war on terror began with the group that had orchestrated the attacks, al-Qaeda, but defeating this group was not the end-all of the war. Shocking to many, the Bush administration turned to conventional warfare and decided to remove Saddam Hussein as leader of Iraq. According to the article by Kennedy, there was a large degree of discomfort accompanying the idea that the United States was becoming reckless in its hunt for evil adversaries (632). The Bush administration deployed ‘shock and awe’ to remove Saddam, but the expected rapid surrender did not come. ‘Shock and awe’ spun out in a game of insurgence and counter-insurgence as Iraq turned into a country of chaos (Kennedy 632). The American idea of bringing stability and democracy to the country seemed farther away than ever before. Iraq became increasingly unstable and was the scene of many beheadings, death squads, suicide attacks, and human rights abuse. The wars against ‘evil’ in the Middle East in the wake of the 9/11 attacks were sobering to the United States. Still, the Bush administration and American media kept whipping up fear and panic in American society as they reported on terrorist threats and demands for retaliation. A public anxiously looking to the government for protection makes for people easily susceptible to manipulation. The political debate became engulfed by the binary discourse of good and evil, defining every significant political issue. The American people were presented with a fabricated choice where they would either support the president’s war and show their patriotic side, or side with evil, whether this was deliberate or by default (Engels 40). As President Bush put it in another 2002 speech:

“You know, you’ve heard me talk about this probably, but I really, truly view this as a conflict between Good and Evil. And there really isn’t much middle ground. The people we fight are evil people.” (Daghrir 33).

The discourse, as displayed in the case studies mentioned above, can be traced back to the Puritan tradition of the United States. Many times, the mission of American exceptionalism or manifest destiny was implicitly evoked in the justification of the actions of the American

government. The United States as the 'city upon a hill' or 'indispensable nation which has been called by God to achieve the expansion of freedom of the entire world' as Daghrir called it, served as a rationalization of actions in foreign policy (25).

Chapter 3

Implications for the image of the United States on a domestic and international level

The implications of the invocation of an evil enemy are not bound to the foreign policies of the United States. Fighting an evil enemy insinuates that those on the other side are good, which in the case of the United States has strong ties to the high levels of national pride that Americans demonstrate. American citizens express great pride in their anthem, flag, and other symbols featured in everyday American life and feel a strong sense of ultimacy as a significant global force. A 2013 Gallup poll showed that only 1 percent of American adults said to be “not at all proud” to be an American, while 85 percent expressed to be “extremely” or “very proud”. The United States tied for first place with Venezuela in a comparative study on levels of national pride (Brice 58). American politicians also often invoke the narrative of national pride and the greatness of the American experience in their speeches and rallies. Thereby, these strong appeals to American nationalism also find their way into both foreign and domestic policy decisions (Brice 59). In international relations, the consequences of having a high level of national pride are at odds with what is regarded as good politics. Liberalists view the notion of a state regarding itself as superior and willing others to do the same as dangerous. Immanuel Kant considered national pride to be a motive that is irreconcilable with equal dignity and international peace (Brice 60). Realists, on the other hand, are more inclined to favor national interests but still regard a state’s desire to be esteemed as superior to be an unattainable and vain goal (Brice 60).

The notion of ultimacy also plays a role in the United States’ understanding of its own collective, significant experiences (McCartney 404). The Civil War offered a powerfully redemptive message from the collective sins of the United States as a country. Even with only one nation involved, this war symbolized a crisis of mankind to Americans. According to

McCartney, regarding an internal war in apocalyptic terms shows how the United States as a nation favors itself to figure prominently and directly in God's broader plan for humanity (404). The Civil War and the abolition of slavery proved to be a domestic Manichean dilemma. Both parties invoked narratives of evil for their adversaries. Here, the connotations of "good" and "evil" came with racist undertones for those in favor of the system of slavery, as white stood for pure and righteous while black stood for dark and devilish. Yet, for those who favored abolition, the system of slavery was evil. The superiority white Americans felt justified the upholding of slavery again came from the same prerogatives as the notions of global superiority displayed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, while those in favor of slavery and those opposed to slavery held different opinions of what should be regarded as evil, they could not as easily regard each other as an evil enemy as the Civil War saw one nation fight within itself. These were brothers fighting each other. They were torn over this specific part of history but would still hold many of the same principles. This is a significant difference compared to how the United States places other, foreign adversaries on the spectrum of evil.

As McCartney puts it, the United States holds a belief that one day the world will adhere to American principles entirely. This pretense has been considered inaccurate and as arrogant by other nations, a fact that Americans themselves have yet to realize (McCartney 403). A 2010 Gallup poll showed that 80 percent of American adults believed that the United States possessed a unique character, attained through its history and its Constitution, which makes it the greatest country in the world (Brice 62). When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, 71 percent of American citizens supported the war, with only 22 percent opposing the invasion (Brice 65). Notably, there was a large discrepancy in how the motives of the United States for going to war were received between citizens of the United States itself and those of other countries. The question of whether the war on terror was a sincere effort to reduce international terrorism in a 2004 survey got a positive response from 67 percent of Americans but only 35 percent in

France, 29 percent in Germany, and only 20 percent in Turkey (Brice 65). However, 61 percent of Turkish citizens, 53 percent of French citizens, and 47 percent of German citizens believed that the United States wanted to dominate the world, in contrast to 13 percent of Americans (Brice 65). The invasion of Iraq was not the first time America's intentions were questioned around the world and back home. The Vietnam war proved to be an instance where the United States could not proclaim itself to be a savior or the "good". Martin Luther King Jr. even stated he considered war to be an evil, and with the United States being the aggressor in the case of Vietnam, this constituted America being on the side of evil (King Institute). American exceptionalism was challenged by the horrific images of the war shared around the world. Nations now saw the destruction brought by the United States. Questions arose both at home and abroad about whether the United States was really a liberator and bearer of democracy in this case or actually an imperial oppressor (Britton 130). The image of the United States as the hope of humankind was shredded, and America's soft power, "the use of positive attraction and persuasion to achieve foreign policy objectives", declined as it became clear that the country itself was heavily divided over the issue of Vietnam and at the same time was in the middle of the civil rights conflict (McClory).

America's soft power has taken more hits due to its division on many big political topics. Polarization in the country has only grown since the days of the Vietnam War, with discrepancies not only to be found between citizens of foreign nations and Americans themselves but also between Americans of different political beliefs. A 2014 study by Pew Research Center found that 27 percent of Democrats believe the Republican party's policies are a threat to the well-being of the nation, while 36 percent, more than a third, of the Republicans believe this to be true about the policies of the Democratic party. These percentages go up even further when posed to only conservative Republicans or liberal Democrats. With polarization

on the rise in the United States, it can be argued that these percentages would be even higher today (Boxell et al. 11).

The United States claims to have moral excellence based on its military power which is greater than that of most other countries (McCartney 402). Foreign policies of the United States have been saturated by American nationalism, which in turn is grounded by the belief in moral excellence. These specific tendencies that shine through in the methods the United States has used to achieve its goals in the international conflicts it has been embroiled in are globally unpopular, chauvinistic, and potentially dangerous (McCartney 421). Attractive aspects of the American experience have been undercut. The foreign policy of the twenty-first century has been primarily propelled in a single direction because of the September 11 attacks. With the September 11 attacks happening on American soil, they became part of the national mythos, and militarism has become one of the most prominent characteristics of the United States' global stance (McCartney 422). The United States is the leader in military spending, with 801 billion U.S. dollars dedicated to the military in 2021, constituting to almost 40 percent of the total military expenditure globally (The World Bank). Military enrollment soared after the 2001 attacks, and with Congress authorizing the use of military force against the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, President Bush rode the wave of nationalism and fear that took over the country (Webster 2). The attack on the homeland had rekindled a passion in the American people that led to a return to visceral warfare (Kennedy 633). The deployment of large numbers of troops was met with support, as the 'evil acts' of 9/11 had stirred up a desire to make war and prevail (Kennedy 630). As McCartney puts it, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 "provided a rare clarifying moment in the nation's collective consciousness" where both the national identity of the United States as well as its foreign policy were reinvigorated, both separately as well as in relation to one another (400). It also provided a moment where, for the first time since the Cold War had ended, a national focus and sense of mission resurfaced (McCartney 400). McCartney writes:

“In addition, by employing the legitimating power of nationalism to furnish the “official” interpretation of September 11, President George W. Bush was able to provide a context in which Americans could understand and accept a set of foreign policy goals far broader and more ambitious than a simple response to the immediate attacks would have suggested. The only way to ensure such atrocities never happen again, Bush decided for the United States, was to change the global context that had made them possible. Changing the world in this way – to suit American interests by making it more consistent with American values – has always been an implicit component of American nationalism.” (400).

President Bush was a firm believer that life was a constant struggle between good and evil, and he had no doubt that he was an agent of good brought on by God (Smith 229). The war on terror became his personal crusade. Bush heavily exacerbated the crisis at hand, spreading fear to gain support for his war. The notion of American exceptionalism was revived once again as the United States supposedly became the only power that could rid the world of evil. Bush relied on religious rhetoric to base his arguments, stating that the war was in God’s plan (Smith 238). He was clear on his belief that the United States should be leading the war on terror, and he was the right man for the job. The office of the president of the United States holds comparatively greater constitutional authority when it comes to foreign policy than it does in domestic affairs, as established in the 1936 Supreme Court decision in the *United States v. Curtiss-Wright Export Corporation et al.* case. McCartney describes this as the assertion that “the president’s overriding authority in international affairs is rooted in sovereign prerogative rather than a constitutional allocation of power”, thereby relating to the divine powers the United States has allocated to itself (422). The allotment of this amount of power to a president can come with possible dangers. On these dangers, Dagherir writes:

“One of the principle dangers of vesting power in a leader who is convinced of his own righteousness – who believes that he has been called to a crusade against evil- is that the moral imperative driving the mission will justify any and all means used to achieve it. Those who have become convinced that they are waging an epic and passionate existential war against evil cannot, by the very premises of their belief system, accept any limitations –moral, pragmatic, or otherwise- on the methods adopted to triumph in this battle.” (30).

The Bush administration declined to recognize the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) when it came into existence in 2002. A president or a country believing to be the good leading a morally just war against evil will not be able to comprehend any claims of immoral behavior by themselves and without the rule of the ICC, there is no stopping this crusade. Acts of questionable moral behavior such as using nuclear weapons on civilians or false claims of weapons of mass destruction all become justified as a means to a righteous end. New technologies such as drones have also brought more of these unlimited actions under the guise of moral virtuousness. Drones offer a short and easy fix to much more complicated conflicts while taking away a human intermediary and inflicting avoidable suffering on civilian populations (Kennedy 634). As Kennedy puts it, the constant invocation of enemies of the United States as ‘evil’ is paving the way for an absolute evil in American foreign policy outcomes; avoidable and unnecessary suffering (635). Not only new technologies have been used to defeat the evil enemy by all means necessary. The war on terror brought heavy interrogations of anyone deemed a suspect of terrorism, where the United States did not shy away from different forms of torture (Thrall & Goepner 14). Images of Abu Ghraib shocked the world, once again bashing America’s soft power as “normal” American soldiers, not higher authorities such as the government, mistreated prisoners inhumanely. Clearly, the enemy was

no longer seen as another human being, a notion that would lead to the United States performing acts that would earn themselves a description as evil.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of Manichean discourse in the foreign policies of the United States. Manichean discourse is the theory of dividing the world into two spheres: Good versus Evil. The notion that the United States exists in the sphere of the “good” has had a significant impact on the American psyche, and this belief has been embedded in the origin of the United States as a nation. Dating all the way back to the time of the Puritans, Americans have always believed that God destined them and their nation to transform the world. American exceptionalism, the conviction that the United States is unique in its development, history, and values, is at the base of the belief that the United States is inherently good. The United States has a right through manifest destiny to spread its beliefs around the world.

The case studies used in this research present multiple international conflicts in the current and past century where Manichean discourse is represented. The United States and the American presidents have invoked the image of an evil adversary in the Second World War, the Cold War, and the more recent War on Terror. The binary distinction has sometimes oversimplified the justification for intervening in international conflict. Defeating an evil enemy by all means necessary has led to the unnecessary suffering of civilians and the United States possibly crossing the line to the evil side themselves through inhumane actions under the guise of making the world a safe place for democracy.

Manichean discourse is especially present in presidential rhetoric. While these types of rhetoric can be beneficial to a government figure, it is questionable whether it is fair to refer back to a binary distinction so often, as this paints a very black and white picture. More research on the effects of binary discourse in policymaking and speeches on how other nations regard the United States would be recommended. While policies are a form of hard power, speeches can be considered soft power, something of which the United States holds a great deal around the world. It is to be expected that other nations do not feel as tempted to go along with the

binary distinction of good and evil as presented to the American people, which could lead to a decline in soft power. Perhaps the notion of American exceptionalism is one that should be left in the past, while the future of the United States should be focused on a new global identity.

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