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American Exceptionalism

12.22.2011 | Culture and Society, Faculty, Hot Topics  President Barack Obama has adopted a different view of America’s place in the world than his predecessors, promoting American exceptionalism to audiences at home while downplaying it abroad, according to a recent study by a University of Dayton professor.

Assistant communications professor Joe Valenzano III examined 14 speeches and news conferences the president gave during his first six months in office, including his Cairo address June 4, 2009. Jason Edwards, communication studies assistant professor at Bridgewater State University, is a co-author of the essay, which is scheduled to be published in an upcoming book.

In the article, Valenzano defines exceptionalism as a belief the United States is a unique, if not superior, nation when compared to other states and has a special role to play on the world stage.

The research found that while President Obama does affirm American exceptionalism to domestic audiences, he merely acknowledges distinctiveness when addressing foreign audiences, with a focus on partnership and equality.

"Distinctiveness is different from exceptionalism primarily in that it does not claim one culture, system or country is better than another," Valenzano said.

Obama's speeches often include expressions of common ground and even what the U.S. can learn from other countries. In his well known Cairo speech, he sought rapprochement with the Muslim world and Iran, suggesting the U.S. can learn from other cultures and nations, implying that the U.S. is imperfect and unable to solve those imperfections itself, Valenzano said.

"The president may see his emphasis on distinctiveness as the antidote to prior visions of foreign policy that saw the U.S. as the world's policeman," Valenzano said. "It allows the U.S. to get on the road toward getting its own house in order while engaging in global leadership that maintains American security and shares the burden with other states in dealing with global problems."

"Additionally, the idea of an egalitarian international community may seem appealing, but even in such a community there must be a leader and the American public may not embrace a role of partner or, worse, follower in foreign affairs."

The research project was prompted by Obama's answer in April 2009 to a reporter's question of whether or not he believed in American exceptionalism: "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." He added that he was proud of his country and recognized that U.S. leadership depended upon forming partnerships with other nations.

The remarks set off a controversy in the United States, with some saying the Obama thought too little of this country while others said it was the right way to restore the nation's reputation and standing abroad, Valenzano said.

"The public has grown to expect presidents to articulate a vision for American exceptionalism that reinforces the 'specialness' of Americans through sanitizing the past, reaffirming the nation's place in the present, and acknowledging its role in the future," he said.

American exceptionalism is a belief with deep roots in U.S. history. The French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville was the first to call the United States "exceptional" in his 1830 treatise Democracy in America. A recent Gallup poll found 80 percent of Americans believe the U.S. is exceptional. And every president has in some way represented this view, Valenzano said.

This manifests itself in two distinct traditions: Exemplar and Interventionist, he said. Exemplarists define America's role in foreign affairs as standing apart from the world and serving as a model or beacon, "a shining city on the hill," according to Valenzano. Interventionists see America as the leader of the free world with a responsibility to involve itself in international affairs that are in the best interests of the global community.
The review of Obama's speeches showed he rests firmly within the exemplarist tradition when speaking to domestic audiences. However, he often couches these comments in a belief that the U.S. has strayed from or failed to live up to its responsibilities, so the U.S. needs to renew or reclaim its leadership mantle, Valenzano said.

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