

argues that three key characteristics describe how Americans see themselves relative to the rest of the world: the notion of a “city on a hill,” an idealistic and missionary spirit, and the invincibility of American technology. In other words, most Americans tend to believe inherently in

1. American innocence;
2. American benevolence;
3. American exceptionalism.

Americans are raised to believe that the United States is “innocent” in world affairs as a people and a country. In other words, Americans do not see themselves as manipulative and aggressive, but as a benign and defensive people and country. American innocence is consistent with the isolationist sentiments that have played such a dominant role in U.S. foreign policy, especially before the cold war.⁵⁵ According to this view, Americans have not been an outward-seeking people. Instead, they have been introspective, concerned with nation-building, and serve as a “city on a hill” for other people and countries to emulate. Over the years, other countries and other ideologies have forced the United States to become actively involved in war and world politics. The German disregard of American neutrality forced the United States to fight in World War I, while the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor forced American entry into World War II. Thus, Americans tend to see themselves and their country as the innocent victims of the acts of others.

When the United States does become involved abroad, American behavior is perceived as “benevolent.” Americans do not become involved in war, for example, solely to defend themselves; rather, they enter wars in order to rid the world of evil and promote peace and freedom for all. As Americans have been taught at a very young age, World War I represented the “war to end all wars.” European realpolitik would be replaced by American idealism, as embodied in President Woodrow Wilson’s plan to create a League of Nations. In World War II, the United States and its allies were dedicated to ridding the world of fascism and constructing a world based on a liberal political and economic order as represented by the United Nations. In both wars, the United States saw itself as not only defending its national security but fighting for the principles of democracy, freedom, and justice for all.

Finally, Americans not only see themselves as innocent and benevolent, but “exceptional” as well. When Americans put their minds to something, they succeed in accomplishing their objectives. American history is perceived as one success story after another, from westward expansion to economic development to the rise of the United States as a global power. Much of this is seen as a function of “yankee ingenuity” and American technological superiority over others. There is also an American sense of *manifest destiny*—a belief in the superiority of American culture and way of life and the need to christianize and Americanize the world.⁵⁶ In other words, American exceptionalism implies that God is on America’s side and that America represents progress and the best social model for the future of the world. Thus, Americans have a high sense of optimism, that is, confidence about their ability to accomplish any task and faith in their future.

The effects of these cultural and national values emphasizing American innocence, benevolence, and exceptionalism on American perceptions of the cold war are obvious. For most Americans, Soviet aggression forced the United States to take an active global leadership role, build up its military to contain aggression, and intervene throughout the world. Thus, Americans were innocent victims of Soviet aggression and needed to contain the threat. Moreover, the cold war was not just a classical struggle for power between two great powers, but represented a messianic struggle between good and evil—the forces of democracy versus totalitarianism, capitalism versus communism, Christianity versus atheism. Thus, the globe was seen to be divided into two hostile blocs: the “evil” communist world led by the Soviet Union versus the “free world” led by the United States. In addition, the United States had not only rescued Western Europe through its generosity with the Marshall Plan, but promoted liberal societies in third-world countries and assisted their nation-building efforts based on the American model. Americans, therefore, did not see themselves as imperialistic or even self-interested during the cold war years, but as an innocent society composed of benevolent and exceptional people who symbolized progress and a hopeful future for the world.⁵⁷

Innocence, benevolence, and exceptionalism are not uniquely American beliefs but to some degree are common cultural and national values within all societies. Groups and societies often see themselves as a superior and chosen people. This is typical of all great powers in world history. For example, the French empire was justified in terms of *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) and the British empire reflected the “white man’s burden” to uplift other people and civilize the world. As Godfrey Hodgson has observed, “All nations live by myths. Any nation is the sum of the consciousness of its people: the chaotic infinitude of the experience and perceptions of millions alive and dead.”⁵⁸ For the United States, “freedom” is the key value that unifies and defines Americans as Alexis de Tocqueville so aptly described in his masterpiece on *Democracy in America* in 1835.⁵⁹ Therefore, a strong sense of nationalism is not a uniquely American trait. Yet, it is also commonly argued that, given America’s short history, the rapid changes experienced with industrialization and modernization, and its ethnic diversity, American nationalism is as powerful a cultural force for most Americans as for any people throughout history. According to political analyst Richard Barnet, “All nations preach the ethic of national superiority but the United States has made a religion of it.”⁶⁰

Implications for Foreign Policy.

American culture and national style have important implications for U.S. foreign policy. First, America’s national style contributes to the tendency of Americans to have a very naive and “rose-colored” view of United States history and its role in world affairs. Westward expansion, for example, is fondly recalled in terms of the frontier spirit, individualism, and ruggedness represented by the farmer and gunslinger, ignoring alternative interpretations that emphasize the ruthlessness of westward expansion and the taking of Native American and Mexican land and lives. In fact, the Mexican-American War was not a defensive war fought by the