

American Psychological Isolationism

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Abstract

The United States possesses a distinctive cultural mindset characterized by a lack of regard for and even lack of awareness of the perspectives of other countries, coupled with a passionate desire to spread American values throughout the world. We term this mindset *American psychological isolationism*. Like American moral values more generally, this psychological outlook has its roots in America's unique religious and cultural history. The American Puritans' religious zeal contributes to America's ideological self-certainty and lack of regard for the values of others. At the same time, America's sense of divine mission in spreading its values, whether other countries like it or not, is traceable to the Puritans' view of themselves as a "shining city on a hill" destined to save all the world.

Keywords: American culture, Protestantism, Implicit Puritanism, moral values, isolationism, unilateralism

On September 23, 1999, the Mars Climate Orbiter began its seemingly triumphant arrival to Mars orbit. The \$125 million NASA spacecraft had voyaged over 30 million miles to its final destination. The orbiter was designed to study the Martian weather and climate, paving the way for an ambitious Mars 2001 mission and eventual manned voyages. At approximately 9 a.m. the orbiter disappeared behind the planet and never emerged. The spacecraft entered a lower orbit than planned and was destroyed by atmospheric pressures. NASA's investment, and the scientific community's hopes for a treasure trove of information on the Martian climate, literally fell to pieces. The subsequent investigation traced the disaster to contractor Lockheed Martin's failure to use metric units (the international standard for the scientific community) in its measurements (CNN, 1999, September 30). The thrusters fired too hard because they had been programmed using pounds force rather than metric units. As a result, the orbiter flew to 50 kilometers rather than 80 kilometers above the surface.

Similar mix-ups between metric units and "customary units" (e.g., pounds, yards, and miles) have led to aircraft being overloaded by as many as 30,000 pounds, and patients receiving doses of medication as much as 17 times greater than prescribed (Institute for Safe Medication Practices, 1999; National Transportation Safety Board, 1996; Nelson, 2000). Yet the United States has proven curiously resistant to adopting the metric system of measurement, which is used in every country in the world except the U.S., Burma, and Liberia (both of whom rely on metric units far more than the United States; The World Factbook, 2006). This is despite the fact that metric units are considered more logical and easier to use than customary units.

There are reasons to believe that the roots of the Mars Climate Orbiter disaster lie in some of America's earliest cultural influences. The present article argues that the United States possesses a distinctive cultural mindset characterized by a lack of regard for, and even lack of

basic awareness of, international standards and values. We term this mindset *American psychological isolationism*. Importantly, we do not use the label “isolationist” in the traditional sense—as an overriding concern with domestic affairs combined with an anti-interventionist foreign policy. Although the United States has at points been traditionally isolationist in its foreign policy, it is not so at the moment, nor has it been in recent decades. Rather, we characterize America as isolationist in a *psychological* sense—as possessing a myopic lack of regard for the perspectives of other nations, coupled with the willingness to unilaterally impose American values. This distinctive form of psychological isolationism can be associated with an aggressively internationalist foreign policy.

As we will argue, like American moral values more generally, this psychological outlook has its roots in America’s unique religious and cultural history. The American Puritans’ religious zeal contributes to America’s ideological self-certainty and lack of regard for the values of others. At the same time, America’s sense of divine mission in spreading its values, whether other countries like it or not, is traceable to the Puritans’ view of themselves as a “shining city on a hill” destined to save all the world.

The present article is structured as follows. We begin by reviewing evidence of American psychological isolationism, considering first its inward-turning facet (myopia) and then its outward-turning facet (unilateralism). Then we consider some of the various roots of American psychological isolationism, among them geographic factors and social power. Finally, we describe how America’s Puritan-Protestant past has profoundly shaped contemporary America, including instilling the sense of divine mission that accounts for the unique nature of American psychological isolationism.

American Myopia

Americans are more likely than members of other developed nations to view their way of life as superior to that of other countries (Shafer, 1991). In a poll of Americans, the “most significant event in world history” was the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, beating out the life and death of Jesus Christ (Morone, 2003). International surveys confirm that America is the most patriotic country in the world (Inglehart, Basáñez, Díez-Medrano, Halman, & Luijckx, 2004; Lipset, 1996). Four times as many Americans are very patriotic as in Germany, twice as many as in France, and 50% more than in the United Kingdom (Shafer, 1991). However, Americans do not merely act as if we live in the greatest and most important country in the world. At times, we seem to simply disregard the rest of the world entirely.

In making a case that Americans tend to mentally exclude the non-American world, one can draw on a variety of sources. American psychological isolationism manifests itself in the tendency to ignore the rest of the world in the domains of sports and entertainment, as well as standards for weights and measures (Hoffarth, 2009, February 1; Nelson, 2000; Rushin, 2010, October 27). Americans are further relatively unlikely to learn a second language or seek out contact with other cultures, and often display a lack of knowledge about other countries (Allnutt, 2006, May 9; Avon, 2011, February 4; Roper Public Affairs, 2002, 2006). Although instance of American myopia can be amusing, this mindset contributes to serious foreign policy fiascos such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Kull, 2003).

Reflecting this tendency to disregard other countries, Americans call our yearly baseball championship the “World Series” (Rushin, 2010, October 27). More generally, Americans often refer to sports teams that win a national title as “world champions”— even in the case of sports such as American football, played principally in the United States. Tickets for the Superbowl have even been printed with the title "World Championship Game" (Hoffarth, 2009, February 1).

This myopia is likewise evident in how Americans compile lists of the best-selling and most financially successful albums, movies, and other forms of popular entertainment. Such lists often only consider consumption by Americans, making *Gone with the Wind* (a film that romanticizes life in the pre-civil war American South) the most popular movie ever and the *Eagles Greatest Hits* (rock and roll with a country-western flavor) the bestselling album of all time (Classic Bands, 2009; Lotter, 2008, July 19; Publications International, 2010; Scene Stealers, 2008). The true winners, going by international figures, are the more universally appealing *Avatar* and Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (Guinness World Records, 2010).

Limited contact with cultures outside the United States is both a cause and consequence of American myopia. Only 22% of Americans have a passport, compared to over 60% of Australians and Canadians, 75% of Britons, and 70 percent of Europeans overall (Avon, 2011, February 4; Roper Public Affairs, 2002, 2006; Thurber, 2009, November 29). A recent Roper poll of respondents from the United States, Canada, Mexico, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Great Britain, and Japan revealed that Americans were less well-traveled than any other nation surveyed. 78% of Americans had not left the country in the past three years, compared to only 8% of Swedes, 23% of Germans and Britons, 44% of Canadians, and 67% of the Japanese (Roper Public Affairs, 2002, 2006).

Even if they did travel regularly to foreign countries, most Americans would have difficulty conversing with the non-English speaking citizens of those countries. This is because Americans are also less likely than citizens of most other developed countries to speak a second language: only 9% of Americans are bilingual, compared to 30% of Britons and over 50% of Europeans (Associated Press, 2005, September 24; Roper Public Affairs, 2002, 2006). Indeed, a

mere 14% of Americans believe knowing a second language is in any way necessary (Roper Public Affairs, 2006).

Lack of contact with members of other cultures and a disinterest in learning a second language doubtless contribute to America's lack of knowledge about other countries in general (Business Wire, 2006, August 14; Roper Public Affairs, 2006). Americans' knowledge of world geography is particularly weak. The aforementioned Roper poll found that Americans scored more poorly on overall geographic knowledge than every country surveyed (Roper Public Affairs, 2002, 2006). When asked to identify sixteen major countries on a world map, Americans came in dead last, on average correctly identifying only seven. In contrast, Swedes got thirteen out of sixteen countries correct, Italians and Germans twelve, Britons and Canadians nine, and Mexicans eight. Supplementing the Roper poll with a less scientific but more expansive sample, the company Geography Zone conducts an online geography competition played by 20,000 people across the world each day. Out of 149 countries sampled, the U.S. came in 149th in geographic knowledge (Kyrgyzstan came in first, with respondents from the Philippines, Indonesia and Israel scoring high in geographic knowledge as well; Allnutt, 2006, May 9).

The Roper poll further found that despite the fact that the U.S. had just invaded Afghanistan, American were less likely than members of any other country to know that the Taliban and al Qaeda were based there (58% of Americans answered correctly, compared to 84% of Swedes and Britons, 82% of Italians, 79% of Germans, and 75% of Canadians). Only 36% of Americans were aware India and Pakistan are in conflict over Kashmir, the lowest percentage of any country surveyed except Mexico (29%), a far less economically developed nation where many citizens lack access to adequate education. A comparable percentage of Americans (34%) correctly indicated the island from the previous season of the reality TV show *Survivor* was

located in the South Pacific. In contrast, a full 60-70% of Swedes, Britons, the French, Italians, Germans, and the Japanese, as well as 47% of Canadians, were aware Kashmir is a territory disputed by India and Pakistan (Roper Public Affairs, 2002, 2006).

Some common American misconceptions about the world seem to inflate the global prominence of the United States. 74% of Americans believe English is the most common native language in the world; less than one in five Americans correctly indicate Mandarin Chinese (Roper Public Affairs, 2002, 2006). Further, nearly six in ten overestimate the U.S. population, three in ten even believing it to be over one billion people (demographers estimate there are only 300 million Americans). In contrast, Canadians, the French, Germans, Italians, Swedes, Britons, and the Japanese correctly estimated not only the population of their own country, but that of the United States as well (Roper Public Affairs, 2002, 2006).

American inattention to other countries may have contributed to domestic support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Nearly a third (31%) of U.S. citizens mistakenly believed the rest of the world supported the war and another 31% believed opinions were evenly divided. Only a minority (35%) of Americans were aware that world opinion strongly opposed the invasion (Kull, 2003). (In not one country out of 38 surveyed did a majority of respondents actually support America's invasion of Iraq.) Strikingly, of Americans who incorrectly believed world opinion favored the U.S. invasion, an overwhelming 81% supported the war. In contrast, only 28% of Americans who knew the rest of the world was opposed personally favored U.S. President George W. Bush's decision to invade. In addition, nearly half of Americans (48%) erroneously believed a majority of Muslims worldwide support U.S. anti-terror efforts. However, in six of eight Muslim nations surveyed, large majorities of respondents opposed the U.S.

campaign against terrorism. As the upcoming section will discuss, perceived unilateralist policies in the context of the war on terror contribute to America's negative image in many countries.

American Unilateralism

We will now consider the more outward-turning facet of U.S. psychological isolationism: America's willingness to ignore international opinion and act alone. This is readily apparent in the United States' rejection of international agreements and organizations, coupled with an often aggressively internationalist foreign policy.

In recent years the U.S. has repeatedly rejected international agreements endorsed by most other nations. One prominent case is America's refusal to participate in the Kyoto Protocol on limiting greenhouse emissions, spearheaded by then Vice President Al Gore and signed by 187 nations, but not Gore's own country. Although President Bill Clinton signed the agreement, the U.S. Senate refused to ratify it. The non-participation of the United States, the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, effectively killed the Kyoto Protocol (Liu, 2006, August, 29). The U.S. is the only country in the world other than Somalia that has not yet ratified the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, in part due to concern among religious conservatives about international meddling in American parenting (Smolin, 2006; Unicef, 2010).

The paragon example of unilateralist American isolationism is a willingness to act outside international governmental organizations. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was instrumental in founding the League of Nations as part of the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War 1 in Europe (Sharp, 1991). The primary goal of the League was to settle international disputes through negotiation and arbitration, with the wider aim of preventing future world wars. Creation of the League was a key goal of Wilson's Fourteen Points for Peace. Wilson was awarded the 1919 Nobel Peace Prize for his accomplishment in helping to create the League of

Nations. However, his own country refused to join, despite a Presidential address to congress and national campaign to win the support of the American people.

Americans also have a long history of distrust in and conflict with the League of Nations' successor organization, the United Nations. The U.S. joined the United Nations as a founding member in 1945 on the strict condition it could veto any meaningful U.N. action (Moore & Pubantz, 2006; Wilcox, 1945). In the last 20 years America has accounted for 12 of 17 cases in which a member nation cast the sole dissenting vote on a Security Council resolution. The U.S. also frequently withholds its U.N. dues (a total of 1.3 billion dollars; Moore & Pubantz, 2006).

John Bolton, America's United Nations representative during 2005-2006, was well known for his combative, hostile attitude toward the organization. As Undersecretary of State under the Bush administration, Bolton led U.S. opposition to the International Criminal Court and enforcement of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, arguing this would allow inspections of U.S. weapons sites (which according to the U.S. government do not contain any biological weapons; Slavin & Nichols, 2003, November 30). In 1994, Bolton stated "There is no such thing as the United Nations. There is only the international community, which can only be led by the only remaining superpower, which is the United States" (Watson, 2005, March 8). Bolton further opined that "The Secretariat Building in New York has 38 stories. If you lost ten stories today, it wouldn't make a bit of difference" (Applebaum, 2005, March 9). President Bush nonetheless named Bolton America's U.N. envoy in 2005.

The United Nations is a favorite target of American conservatives like Bolton, who argue the organization and its resolutions violate U.S. national sovereignty and independence. The most extreme opposition comes from Americans who believe the U.N. is part of a black helicopter-facilitated conspiracy to take over the United States government (Keith, 1995). The

ostensive goal of this broad conspiracy is to establish an authoritarian one world government. The U.N. is considered only one of a number of international front organizations for this New World Order, which in some versions serves the goals of the antichrist (Barkun, 2003). Some Americans have even formed armed militias, organized into divisions and brigades, aiming to resist a one-world government by force (Potok, 1996).

Relations between the U.S. and U.N. reached a nadir in 2002-2003 prior to and during the second U.S. invasion of Iraq (Ricks, 2006; Woodward, 2004). The Bush Administration argued the Saddam Hussein regime had failed to divest itself of all weapons of mass destruction (WMD), necessitating disarmament by force. U.N. inspectors had not uncovered evidence of WMD, but noted Iraq had failed to fully cooperate on a number of occasions. The Bush Administration further contended Hussein's regime had ties to Al-Qaeda, and that "regime change" presented an opportunity to spread liberal democracy to the Middle East. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1441, issued in 2002, demanded Iraq disarm within months, promising "serious consequences" for noncompliance, yet set no specific deadline. Dissatisfied with the Iraqi response, America and a few allies invaded Iraq in March 2003, essentially bypassing both the resolution and the United Nations. This occurred despite vociferous protests from the international community, including longtime allies such as France and Germany. U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan insisted the war violated the U.N. charter and was illegal under international law, an opinion shared by many legal experts (Liu, 2006, August, 29). No weapons of mass destruction or solid evidence of Iraqi ties to Al-Qaeda were ever unearthed.

The war led to a groundswell in anti-U.S. sentiment (Fabbrini, 2004). In 2002 76% of Egyptians viewed the U.S. unfavorably, a number that rose to 98% by 2004 (Katzenstein & Keohane, 2006; Zogby International, 2004). 61% of Moroccans viewed America unfavorably in

2002, compared to 88% in 2004 (Katzenstein & Keohane, 2006; Zogby International, 2004). In addition, 83% of citizens of the United Kingdom had a favorable opinion of America in 2000, a figure that plummeted to 56% by 2006 (Kohut & Stokes, 2006; Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2008). In Germany favorable views of the U.S. fell from 78% to 37% in that same period, in Spain from 50% to 23%, and in France from 62% to 39% (Kohut & Stokes, 2006; Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2008). In a late 2003 Eurobarometer poll, 53% of respondents in the European Union felt the U.S. was a threat to world peace—the same percentage as for Iran and North Korea (BBC, 2003, November 3).

The second Iraq war is only the latest in a long line of U.S. wars that inflamed anti-American sentiment in other nations and were justified by America's ostensive mission to spread its values. The Mexican-American war culminated in the annexation of half the territory of Mexico (including Texas, New Mexico and California), leading Mexican President Porfirio Díaz to comment morosely "Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States" (as quoted in Rubin & Rubin, 2004, p. 104). The notion that America possessed a God-given "Manifest Destiny" to spread to the Pacific Ocean was one ideological underpinning for the war against Mexico. John O'Sullivan, editor of the *Democratic Review*, famously referred to "Our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence" (as quoted in Zinn, page 151). The Vietnam War and American support of military coups in foreign countries during the cold war were justified by America's God-given mission to save the world from communism and spread free market capitalism (Gaddis, 1997).

The damage to America's reputation from the Iraq invasion may be long lasting. Barack Obama's Presidential term has been associated with significant improvements in European attitudes toward the United States, but not in the critically important Middle East (Pew Global

Attitudes Project, 2010). At the same time, America is still widely perceived as acting unilaterally: in 2010 a mere 32% of people worldwide indicated the U.S. takes into account their interests when forming its foreign policy, an increase of only 6% from during the Bush administration (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2010). The thoroughness with which Americans have succeeded in alienating many other nations is based in a perceived lack of regard for the viewpoints of others, coupled with an apparent willingness to unilaterally impose American values (Katzenstein & Keohane, 2006). In the next section we consider some of the potential sources of this distinctive cultural mindset.

The Roots of American Psychological Isolationism

Any complex phenomenon is of course determined by numerous factors. Here we consider how three especially important factors contribute to psychological isolationism in America: geographic variables, social power, and America's unique Puritan-Protestant heritage.

Geography and Associated Factors

Research in cross-cultural psychology identifies a link between the geography of an area and the values that develop there (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Triandis, 1988). For instance, areas of the world with rocky terrain (which makes agriculture difficult) and natural harbors tend to develop fishing economies. Agriculture-based economies require considerable cooperation (e.g., to develop irrigation systems) and therefore promote collectivistic values. In contrast, fishing is a more solitary pursuit requiring less cooperation, giving rise to individualistic cultures. It is noteworthy that Ancient Greece, the birthplace of western individualism, is characterized by rocky terrain and natural harbors.

The presence of habitable agricultural land and sparsely settled, open frontiers also promotes individualism (Turner, 1920). Frontier conditions with a lack of government authority

lead to an ethic of self reliance and independence that persists long after the frontier has vanished. Even today, people who live in what used to be America's western frontier report more individualistic values than people from other areas of the United States (Vandello & Cohen, 1999). In addition, contemporary Japanese from the northern island of Hokkaido, settled under frontier conditions, report levels of individualism closer to Americans than to other Japanese (Kitayama, Ishii, Imada, Takemura, & Ramaswamy, 2006).

Geographic and associated factors likely contributed to American psychological isolationism (Roper Public Affairs, 2006; Zakaria, 2008). The United States is a large country flanked by two oceans, leaving it physically isolated from other countries and promoting a psychological sense of isolationism. The U.S. is further bordered on the north and south by only two nations, Canada and Mexico, limiting experience with and therefore knowledge about other countries. These variables almost certainly make a significant contribution to the psychological isolationism of the United States.

Power

Power likewise contributes to psychological isolationism. The United States is by many measures the most powerful country on earth, especially militarily (Wohlforth, 1999). America accounts for 40% of the world's military expenditures, with a military budget bigger than the next fifteen countries combined (Odom & Dujarric, 2004). Together with the world's largest economy, this translates into enormous influence on the world stage.

The powerful do not take into account the perspective of those less powerful simply because they have less need to, and this tendency is fundamental to human cognition (Fiske, 1993). In one study, participants were first asked to recall a time they felt powerful or powerless. Next, they were asked to write a letter "E" on their forehead to identify themselves in an

upcoming interaction task. Participants primed to feel powerful were significantly more likely to write the letter from their own visual perspective rather than that of their interaction partner (e.g., writing the letter E as Ǝ; Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006). More generally, less powerful individuals are more accurate in their perceptions of the powerful than vice versa (Fiske, 1993).

At the same time, power increases the willingness to act on the world (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Power disinhibits action, leading individuals to act on their attitudes and dispositions. Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee (2003) asked participants to recall a time they felt powerful. Subsequently, in an ostensibly unrelated part of the study, they completed questionnaires in front of a fan that annoyingly blew the papers in their face. Participants led to feel powerful were more likely to get up and turn off the fan. Situational power also increases the correspondence between attitudes and behaviors (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001). Thus, America's extraordinary power may lead it to pay little attention to the opinions of less powerful countries and act based on its own attitudes and desires.

However, factors such as geographic isolation and social power can only partly account for U.S. psychological isolationism. Being flanked by large oceans contributes to America's tendency to tune out the rest of the world, but cannot explain why Americans view themselves as an inspiring ideal for all others. Power adds to psychological isolationism by causing individuals and groups to ignore others' perspectives and act based on their own attitudes, but cannot explain why Americans are *evangelists* for their attitudes, seeking actively to export them to all other nations. As we will argue, America's Puritan-Protestant heritage helps explain not only the unique content of American values, but also a conviction in such values and desire to export them elsewhere.

America's Puritan Heritage

Alexis de Tocqueville (1840/1990) was the first to label American values as “exceptional,” and further traced those values to the American Puritans. Puritanism began as a movement within the Church of England in the 16th century. The Puritans felt the English Church had taken the Protestant Reformation insufficiently far and strove for greater purity and personal piety. Widely considered religious fanatics, they referred to themselves as “The Godly” rather than “Puritans,” a pejorative label coined by their enemies. Fleeing religious persecution in England, some separatist Puritans emigrated to the New World, hoping to establish a religious utopia. In some cases, entire religious congregations emigrated together (Bellow, 2003). These early Puritans were true religious zealots. Many Puritan communities in the American colonies banned maypoles, plays, and any festivities held on Saturday night. Boston even outlawed Christmas celebrations from 1659 to 1681 as overly decadent (West, 2003).

Puritans and Puritanism influenced the values of all the British colonies of America, including the South (Bellow, 2003; Gelertner, 2007; Morone, 2003; Sanchez-Burks, 2005; Tocqueville, 1840/1990; Weber, 1904/1958). In 1640 Puritans were over half the European population of the future United States (Morone, 2003). The Great Awakening, a massive religious revival of the 1730s and 1740s centered in New England helped spread that region's Puritan zeal across the colonies. At independence in 1776, three-quarters of Americans were Puritans, and fourth-fifths of churches in the United States were Puritan churches (Gelertner, 2007; Morone, 2003). As Gelertner (2007, p. 153) writes, “Before the Civil War, Puritanism remained the country's dominant spiritual influence.” Richard Hofstadter (1962, p. 59) writes that Puritan leaders were “as close to an intellectual ruling class as America has ever had.” Alexis de Tocqueville (1840/1990) compares the Puritan influence on early America to a fire set

on a high hill whose light “still tinge(s) the furthest reaches of the horizon” (p. 31-32).

Tocqueville further wrote that “It seems to me, that I can see the entire destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who came ashore” (p. 278). Although Puritanism as an official movement has long since faded out—no one considers themselves a Puritan today—it left an indelible influence on American religion and culture.

One legacy of America’s Puritan past is the remarkable religious fervor of today’s Americans. Analyses of three decades of the World Values Survey, which covers over 60 countries, shows wealth and democracy almost universally lead to secularization and less traditional values (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). The major exception is the United States, which remains deeply religious (Gallup & Linday, 1999; Greeley, 1991; Norris & Inglehart, 2004). 94% of Americans believe in God, and half rate God’s importance in their life as a maximum of “10” on a scale of 1 to 10 (Baker, 2005). International comparisons based on economic development predict that only 5% of Americans should feel this way (Wald, 1987). Even more strikingly, more than half the U.S. population are fundamentalists who believe the universe was created less than 10,000 years ago (Harris, 2006). A full 44% of Americans believe Jesus will return to earth within 50 years (Harris, 2006; Sheler, 2006). The United States remains deeply religious despite the fact that most other historically Protestant cultures have secularized considerably (Norris & Inglehart, 2004).

A further example of American moral exceptionalism is U.S. individualism, which is extreme even by western standards (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Indeed, Tocqueville (1840/1990) coined the term “individualism” in reference to American values (Isernia, 2006). In a survey of over 50 nations throughout the world, the United States scored as more individualistic than any other country (Hofstede, 2001; see also Hampden-Turner &

Trompenaars, 1993; Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). Although it has many sources, American individualism stems in part from the Protestant emphasis on a personal relationship with God (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Weber, 1904/1958). Martin Luther, for instance, argued that every person is a “perfectly free Lord, subject to none” (as quoted in Sampson, 2000, p. 1427).

Consistent with this philosophy, historically Protestant countries are more individualistic than countries with roots in other religions (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997).

Another key aspect of America’s distinctive morality, one even more deeply rooted in a unique religious heritage, is U.S. traditionalism and moral absolutism. As noted, increasing affluence is strongly associated worldwide with the fading of absolutist and traditional forms of morality (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). The most prominent statistical outlier is the United States (Baker, 2005; Inglehart, 1997). Americans express attitudes on a range of social issues— divorce, homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, suicide, and promiscuity among them— that are much more conservative than those of citizens of other wealthy democracies, and indeed more conservative than the average worldwide. Moreover, young Americans are just as likely as older generations to endorse traditional positions on such issues.

American religiosity likewise fuels the tendency to view moral issues in black-or-white terms, rather than shades of grey. Religions that make unambiguous moral prescriptions, such as Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam (as opposed to Buddhism, for instance) promote absolutist values (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Lipset, 1996). In the World Values Survey, the absolutist position is represented by the statement “There are absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil. These always apply to everyone, what ever the circumstances.” People from economically underdeveloped and deeply religious societies are more likely to endorse

absolutism (e.g., Nigeria, at 60% of the citizenry) than members of less affluent, secular countries (e.g., Sweden, at 19%). Reflecting a heritage as a nation founded by religious zealots, Americans score much closer to Nigerians than Swedes—a full half of the U.S. population are moral absolutists (Baker, 2005).

The influence of traditional Puritan-Protestant values on contemporary Americans can be implicit (i.e., intuitive, spontaneous, and even unconscious) in nature. A large body of work documents the central role of implicit mental processes in social cognition (Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). One important source of evidence is that unobtrusively priming concepts has powerful downstream effects on judgments and behaviors. In one study, priming words related to stereotypes of the elderly (e.g., Florida, bingo), led college students to walk more slowly as they left the laboratory (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). This shows that cultural ideas (such as common stereotypes) can shape behavior without the awareness of the person performing the behavior. Many cultural influences may be similarly implicit (Cohen, 1997; Nisbett et al., 2001).

Recent laboratory studies suggest that priming traditional Puritan-Protestant values influences the judgments and actions of contemporary Americans, but not members of comparison cultures (Sanchez-Burks, 2005; Sanchez-Burks & Uhlmann, in press; Uhlmann, Poehlman, & Bargh, 2009; Uhlmann, Poehlman, Tannenbaum, & Bargh, 2011). Based on the theology of John Calvin, Protestant values promote hard work and the accumulation of capital as hallmarks of divine grace and salvation (Weber, 1904/1958). Although many non-Protestant cultures also value work, they typically do so on more secular grounds (Fukuyama, 1995; Landes, 1998). A relevant experiment examined whether contemporary Americans implicitly associate hard work with salvation, consistent with Calvinist Protestantism. Reflecting the

persistent influence of Calvinist theology, Americans but not members of comparison cultures (Canadians, Germans, Italians, and Argentineans) worked harder on a laboratory task after being nonconsciously primed with words related to divine salvation (Uhlmann et al., 2011).

Part of what makes these results so striking is that many, if not most Americans have no direct connection to the founder's religion. Yet remarkably, less religious and non-Protestant Americans were just as likely to exhibit the salvation prime effect as devout American Protestants. In fact, the majority of Americans in all of the more than half a dozen studies from this line of research did not even self-identify as Protestants. For example, in the salvation prime study Catholics (37% of the U.S. sample) and Jews (17% of the U.S. sample) outnumbered Protestants (14% of the U.S. sample). Further, dropping Protestants from the analyses left the effects unchanged (Uhlmann et al., 2009, 2011).

This is consistent with the notion that mere exposure to a culture leads individuals to implicitly absorb prevailing values and beliefs, regardless of whether they personally endorse those values (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Indeed, as immigrants spend more time in the United States, they become increasingly likely to exhibit judgments that reflect the influence of Puritan-Protestant theology (Uhlmann, Heaphy, Ashford, Zhu, & Sanchez-Burks, 2012). Further supporting the theory that bicultural individuals are able to switch between different cultural mindsets (Hong, Chui, & Kung, 1997; Hong, Morris, Chiu & Benet-Martinez, 2000), bicultural Asian Americans exhibit priming effects consistent with implicit Puritanism when their American (but not their Asian) identity is salient (Uhlmann et al., 2011).

Thus, in contemporary America, implicit feelings, judgments, and behaviors frequently reflect traditional Puritan-Protestant values. As we will argue in the next section, one of these implicit legacies is American psychological isolationism.

America's Sense of Divine Mission

A key source of American psychological isolationism is the divine sense of purpose with which Americans have imbued their country from the very beginning. This perceived divine mission finds its origins in the values and theology of the early Puritan-Protestants. The Puritans sought to create a spiritually perfect and pure nation that would serve as a beacon to the world, transforming it by example. The Puritan notion of Americans as a chosen people in a chosen land, “nation of saints,” or “redeemer nation,” charged with saving all the world, is present in the speeches and writings of American leaders throughout its history.

While still aboard the ship the *Arbella*, Puritan leader John Winthrop gave a sermon called “A Model of Christian Charity” to the future Massachusetts Bay Colonists. In it he declared that “We shall be as a city on a hill, the eyes of all people upon us” (as quoted in Collins, 1999, p. 65). Winthrop was referring to Matthew (5:14) “You are the light of the world. A city that is set high on a hill cannot be hidden.” President elect John F. Kennedy invoked Winthrop in a 1961 speech, claiming “...I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship *Arbella* three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier. ‘We must always consider,’ he said, ‘that we shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us’” (Kennedy, 1961, January 9). Ronald Reagan referred to the city on a hill when announcing his candidacy for President in 1979, “A troubled and afflicted mankind looks to us, pleading for us to keep our rendezvous with destiny... that we will become that shining city on a hill” (Reagan, 1979, November 13).

Many Puritans drew a parallel between their colonies in the New World and the Biblical Israel (Morone, 2003). Winthrop argued that “We are entered into a Covenant with Him for this

work... we shall find that the God of Israel is among us” (as quoted in Gelertner, 2007, p. 24). John Cotton believed that New England would become “the new heaven and the new earth wherein dwell righteousness” (as quoted in Mather, 1702, p. 325). Importantly, these religious leaders were stating not just their personal vision of the New World colonies, but a view that was widely shared by their Puritan brethren (Gelertner, 2007; Morone, 2003). Pilgrim William Bradford wrote that “Thus out of small beginnings, greater things have been produced by His hand that made all things out of nothing... and as one small candle may light a thousand; so the light kindled here has shown that unto many, yea, in some sort, to our whole nation” (as quoted in Gelertner, 2007, p. 36). In 1663 another Puritan Pilgrim “blessed God for the opportunity of freedom and liberty to enjoy the ordnances of God in purity among His people” (as quoted in Gelertner, 2007, pp. 30-31).

Although they found much inspiration in the ideals of the enlightenment and in some cases rejected conventional religion, many of the founding fathers possessed a sense of America’s divine destiny. John Adams, one of the founders with Puritan roots, wrote in 1765 that “I will always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scheme and design in Providence” (as quoted in Gelertner, 2007, p. 23). George Washington, a less religious man and Anglican by upbringing, wrote that he was sure that “there never was a people who had more reason to acknowledge a divine interposition in their affairs than those of the United States” (as quoted in Gelertner, 2007, p. 94).

Abraham Lincoln was a religious skeptic whose values were steeped in the enlightenment and classical liberalism (Donald, 1996). However, Lincoln nonetheless declared the U.S. “the last, best hope of earth” and that America “held out a great promise to all the people of the world for all time to come” (as quoted in Gelertner, 2007, pp. 141-142). A later U.S. President,

Woodrow Wilson, articulated a more explicitly theistic version, stating that “I believe the glory of America is that she is a great spiritual conception... America came into existence, my fellow citizens, in order to show the way to mankind in every part of the world to justice, freedom, and liberty” (as quoted in Gelertner, 2007, p. 156). Henry R. Luce, editor of *Life* magazine, wrote prior to World War II that the United States had a “manifest duty” to be the “good Samaritan of the entire world.” Only America could lift up “mankind from the level of the beasts to what the Psalmist called a little lower than the angels” (as quoted in Morone, 2003, p. 376). It is our contention that this sense of divine purpose gives American psychological isolationism its unique flavor: inwardly focused in its lack of regard for the perspectives of others, yet outwardly focused in its desire to Americanize the rest of the world.

Conclusion

The present review argues American culture is characterized by a highly distinctive form of psychological isolationism. Americans are psychological isolationists in terms of their lack of regard for (in some cases, even lack of basic awareness of) the views of others. This in itself is not especially unusual or distinctive—many cultures, both in modern times and the historical past, can be described as inward-turning. For example, the rulers of Japan and China sought to shut out external influences during the Heian period and Ming dynasties, respectively (Hurst, 2007; Vo Glahn, 1996). However, Americans are also psychological isolationists in a second, more outward-turning way. More specifically, in terms of a passionate desire to spread American values to the rest of the world. This cultural tendency is also a form of psychological isolationism, in that it is marked by a unilateralist, myopic disregard for the values and goals of other nations.

There are a number of noteworthy contributors to American psychological isolationism. America's large size, geographic isolation and lack of shared borders lead to a deficit in experience with, and therefore knowledge about, the rest of the world (Zakaria, 2008). In addition, the high status accorded by America's position as the world's sole superpower is associated with an unwillingness to adopt the perspective of others and tendency to act on one's own attitudes and desires (Fiske, 1993; Galinsky et al., 2003). However, although undoubtedly significant contributors, factors such as geography and power cannot fully explain why Americans are ideological evangelists who view it as their divine mission to spread U.S. values throughout the world.

Moreover, geography and power cannot explain the unique *content* of what have been referred to as America's "exceptional" values. America is an outlier nation not just in terms of its passionate individualism, but also in retaining remarkably traditional values in the face of tremendous economic development (Baker, 2005). In general, economic growth leads to secularization, a lack of moral absolutism, and liberal attitudes toward sexuality, the death penalty, and other social issues (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). The United States is a prominent exception. In fact, Americans express social attitudes in some respect more similar to those of impoverished traditional societies than other wealthy democracies.

Numerous scholars have argued that American moral exceptionalism stems— at least in part— from a unique Puritan-Protestant history (Bellow, 2003; Fukuyama, 1995; Landes, 1998; Weber, 1904/1958; Zakaria, 2008). The Protestant emphasis on a personal relationship with God is seen as a significant contributor to U.S. individualism (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Hofstede, 2001). In addition, Puritan religious fanaticism lies at the roots of contemporary America's religiosity and moral traditionalism (Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Weber, 1904/1958).

This cultural legacy is pervasive and often unconscious, influencing not only devout American Protestants, but even less religious and non-Protestant Americans. For example, consistent with the Protestant work ethic, even less religious and non-Protestant Americans respond to an implicit salvation prime by working harder on an assigned task (Uhlmann et al., 2011). Members of a number of comparison cultures (Canada, Italy, Germany, and Argentina) do not show this salvation prime effect. Demonstrating that implicit Puritanism is linked to an American cultural identity, bicultural Asian Americans only exhibit such priming effects when their American (as opposed to Asian) identity is salient (Uhlmann et al., 2011).

The present review argues America's Puritan heritage underlies U.S. psychological isolationism as well. The Puritan's desire from a psychological break from the old world and fanatical conviction in their own beliefs contributes to America's ideological self-certainty and lack of regard for the values of others. Moreover, America's sense of divine mission in spreading its values is traceable to the Puritans' view of themselves as a "shining city on a hill" destined to save all the world. A Puritan-Protestant heritage helps explain why Americans display a lack of knowledge about other countries and act unilaterally in international relations. Of course all such complex phenomena are multiply determined and America's unique religious heritage is one of many contributors.

Our case is part historical, part empirical, and part logical. These historical arguments about the cultural importance and legacy of the early Puritan-Protestants concord with the analyses of scholars from a variety of fields (Bellow, 2003; Fukuyama, 1995; Landes, 1998; Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Weber, 1904/1958), and demographic information on the prevalence of Puritanism and Puritan influence in early America (Gelertner, 2007; Morone, 2003). America's sense of divine mission is clearly expressed in the speeches and writings of both recent American

leaders and those of the historical past (Gelertner, 2007). Tellingly, this theme appears not only in the work of devout Puritans (e.g., John Winthrop), but also much less conventionally religious leaders (e.g., Abraham Lincoln). Although not directly relevant to psychological isolationism, laboratory studies buttress our case that America's Puritan-Protestant heritage has a powerful and unconscious effect on the cognitions of contemporary Americans (Sanchez-Burks, 2005; Sanchez-Burks & Uhlmann, in press). Finally, the logical failure of some alternative explanations (e.g., geographical factors) to fully account for American psychological isolationism points to the explanatory potency of a sense of divine mission.

The concept of "American psychological isolationism" raises the question of whether the phenomenon we identify is truly psychological in nature. Some of the evidence we have reviewed clearly reflects the individual-level psychology of everyday Americans. Examples include a lack of interest in foreign countries and languages, misperceptions about international opinion, and overestimates of the U.S. population and use of English around the world. Other evidence, such as a tendency to engage in unilateralist wars, reflects more macro-level processes to which the psychology of everyday Americans and their leaders makes a significant contribution. Future laboratory work should seek to demonstrate a direct causal link between traditional Puritan-Protestant values and American psychological isolationism at the individual level. For example, investigators could implicitly prime religious concepts or the Protestant work ethic and show this leads to a sense of self-certainty, lack of perspective taking, and willingness to act unilaterally. It would further be of great interest to see if even less religious and non-Protestant Americans respond to such primes with increased psychological isolationism. Investigators could also explore the role of an American cultural identity in such phenomena, for

example by examining whether bicultural Americans are more likely to disregard international perspectives and favor unilateral action when their American identity is salient.

In conclusion, America's remarkable religious history contributes not only to an exceptional set of moral values, but also a unique psychological mindset. This mindset is characterized not only by a disregard for the perspectives of non-Americans, but also a willingness to impose American values on others at great cost. One might assume those costs are most heavily born by less powerful nations. However, recent history suggests the damage to the United States and its ideals can be, if less materially severe, much more profound. American power, in tandem with an exceptional cultural outlook, may, ironically, hasten the decline of American status and influence.

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