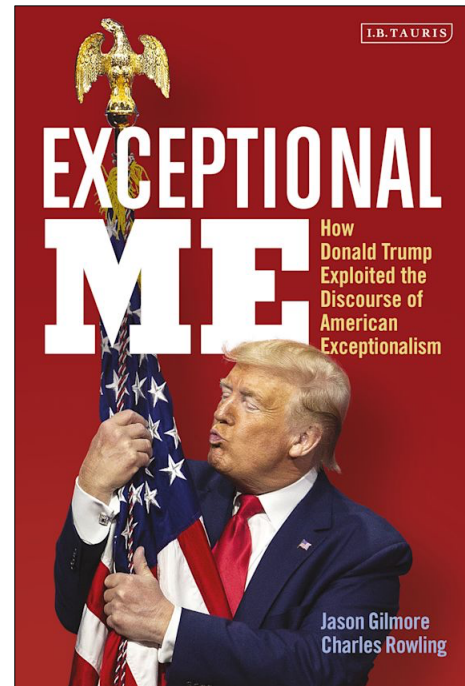


Jason Gilmore and Charles Rowling, **Exceptional Me: How Donald Trump Exploited the Discourse of American Exceptionalism**, London, UK: I.B. Tauris, 2021, 240 pp., \$32.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by  
Emma A. Hall  
University of Warwick

Jason Gilmore and Charles Rowling present a compelling account of the conditional form of American exceptionalism that Donald Trump embraced during his presidential campaign, and then his first presidential term in office, in **Exceptional Me: How Donald Trump Exploited the Discourse of American Exceptionalism**. The term “exploit” is key to Gilmore and Rowling’s central thesis; they argue that while previous presidents have all engaged with exceptionalist discourse—a narrative with much appeal to the American public—Trump separates American exceptionalism from its foundation in the belief of a unique history of the United States, choosing instead to equate exceptionalism with superiority. The work demonstrates the power of the exceptionalist narrative and focuses on the unique approach Trump took in pinning American exceptionalism not to anything inherent within the United States, but only to himself and his administration.



The book starts by confronting the elephant in the room: Trump is quoted as saying of American exceptionalism, “I never liked the term,” in a 2015 interview (p. 1). His relationship with the concept of American exceptionalism, while not as infamous as Obama’s “every nation has exceptionalism” misstep, was well accounted for prior to his candidacy for president (Edwards, 2012, p. 352). What Gilmore and Rowling seek to show, and indeed excel at, is breaking down Trump’s approach as an intentional strategy—piecing together the steps taken during his candidacy and the pivot needed during his presidency to continue to pull off his messaging.

Gilmore and Rowling present a thesis in two acts: the “Exceptional Me Strategy 1.0 and 2.0.” Act 1 explains how, contrary to every previous president who has engaged with American exceptionalism during their candidacies, Trump argued that the United States was distinctly *unexceptional*. Through his “Make America Great Again” strategy, Trump told the American public that American greatness had vanished, and positioned himself as the only individual who could possibly restore its exceptionalism. He argued that there was nothing inherently exceptional about America, but his historically unique campaign provided the only option for the survival of the American project. By boasting of his “singular accomplishments,” Trump’s campaign strategy praised those who were supporting him, arguing that they too were part of this unique political project (p. 71).

In Act 2, Gilmore and Rowling show how Trump slowly pivoted during the first year of his presidency to demonstrate how America was on its way to becoming exceptional, solely because of him and his policies. One of the key successes of this approach had its foundation in Act 1—by reducing the position of the United States in the minds of the American public during his campaign, the smallest of successes in the first year of his presidency could amount to huge leaps to greatness, with little actual change. The authors do not delve into the veracity of Trump's claims of success on the economy, improving the military, or encouraging greater industry, but this does not limit the central thesis of the book. As Gilmore and Rowling state themselves, these claims have been analyzed extensively in the media already. The important thing, they note, is that Trump did not believe it mattered if his proclamations were truthful—if it was repeated enough, his supporters would believe him regardless. In chapter 5, the authors outline "presidential exceptionalism" as a specific communication strategy, a method they argue Trump pursued from the end of his first year in office to a degree unlike any predecessor. The analysis covers both scripted major speeches and his unrestrained rallies, the latter of which adds real depth to the evidence offered. In the lead up to January 2020, and in Trump's final State of the Union Address, exceptionalist language abounds. In his eyes, the United States was a conditionally exceptional nation, as he described a nation set to collapse without him in office. Throughout both acts, the notion of "exploitation" of a discourse is rife, and what is implied is that Trump used this narrative without any belief in its validity. He is caught up with its usefulness (as previous presidents and candidates have) without any ties to its importance to the American public, and the history of the United States.

One area is left largely unaddressed and leaves the reader wanting more. On a few occasions in the text, the authors refer to the all-encompassing nature of the narrative of American exceptionalism—showing through polling data and reference to wider literature that there remains a strong belief in American exceptionalism amongst the American public. The reader is left asking, if this is the case, then why would Trump's supporters embrace the vision of Trump's candidacy that the United States was completely unexceptional? There is a brief reference that, "Trump's supporters, however, seemed to be giving him a pass on American exceptionalism. Trump's 'Crippled' branding of the United States seemed to be resonating with voters from all walks of life" (p. 37). The authors painstakingly evidence the way in which Trump's exceptional strategy took shape and demonstrate its unequivocal difference to any previous presidential candidacy. However, the reason for its effectiveness in resonating with the American public, or indeed the measure of this effectiveness, is somewhat absent.

I would suggest that the authors take one misstep in the way in which they present their analysis. In chapter six, "Me the People," Gilmore and Rowling decide to include Trump's populist approach to support their central thesis, arguing that Trump used three populist strategies during his presidency to build his exceptional image: Trump portraying himself and his policies as being the only representative of the whole nation; Trump redefining "the people" as only his supporters; and Trump arguing any opposition to him was undercutting the will of the American public (p. 136). However, while the section clearly portrays the classic populist approach here, the link to American exceptionalism is somewhat weak. Gilmore and Rowling argue that by Trump claiming that he *was* the American public during his presidency, this was "perhaps the ultimate form of self-exceptionalism" as only he could be America's representative (p. 134). If this populist approach can be argued to be an "ultimate form of self-exceptionalism," does this not dilute the central

argument of the book? Is every populist a self-exceptionalist? Therefore, one might also ask whether the "exceptional me" strategy is simply a populist strategy, linked with the concept of American exceptionalism in name only.

The authors argue throughout the book that Trump has stripped American exceptionalism of all its foundational and value-based elements and reduced it to "American exceptionalism = superiority." This is evidenced clearly, and while the method used for some of the content and discursive analysis is not revealed in the text (which some readers may celebrate and some may find disappointing), at every point the reader is convinced that Trump is indeed employing the discourse of American exceptionalism, even if he has discarded the "baggage" that it has historically come with. However, with the inclusion of this chapter on his populist approach, Gilmore and Rowling veer closely to undermining their own position that the narrative Trump embraces can be labelled "American exceptionalism" at all.

Nonetheless, by the end of *Exceptional Me*, the authors have fulfilled their main objectives effectively and leave the door open to interesting questions on the future of American exceptionalism. Gilmore and Rowling argue that a permanent dichotomy may have emerged between how the Democratic and Republican parties use exceptionalist narratives from this point forward. There are hints of ideational versus ethnonational exceptionalisms moving forward, which will surely undermine the unifying factor that the authors posit that American exceptionalism has historically provided during presidencies and presidential campaigns. While presented as a book on Trump, a key strength of the book is the comparative focus of early chapters on the use of exceptionalist narratives across presidencies in the postwar period and in the candidacies of Kerry (2004), Obama (2008), and Romney (2012). For this reason, the book sits as an excellent accompaniment to previous works on exceptionalist presidential discourse, such as McCrisken's (2003) *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam*, Edward and Weiss's (2011) edited collection *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism*, and Restad's (2014) *American Exceptionalism: An Idea that Made a Nation and Remade the World*. I would encourage all readers interested in presidential rhetoric to engage with this text, as well as those experts on American exceptionalism who seek a comprehensive analysis of Trump's engagement with a discourse he once posited that he "never liked."

### References

- Edwards, J. A. (2012). An exceptional debate: The championing of and challenging to American Exceptionalism. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 15(2), 351–367.
- Edwards, J. A., & Weiss, D. (Eds). (2011). *The rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical essays*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- McCrisken, T. (2003). *American Exceptionalism and the legacy of Vietnam: U.S. foreign policy since 1974*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Restad, H. (2014). *American Exceptionalism: An idea that made a nation and remade the world*. London, UK: Routledge.