

The United States in Decline? Assessing the Impact of International Challenges to American Exceptionalism

JASON GILMORE
Utah State University, USA

CHARLES M. ROWLING
University of Nebraska at Kearney, USA

The idea of American exceptionalism has lived a long and vibrant life in U.S. politics. In recent years, however, many have suggested that the United States might be losing its edge in world affairs. Little research has sought to examine the effects that these explicit challenges to American exceptionalism might have on U.S. public opinion. With this in mind, we conducted an experiment in which a large sample of U.S. adults was exposed to such messages. Specifically, drawing on social identity theory, we explore the psychological dynamics that shape how U.S. adults might respond to messages that directly challenge the idea of American exceptionalism depending on whether these challenges come from competitor countries (e.g., China and Britain) or noncompetitor countries (e.g., Australia and Mexico). Our findings suggest that challenges to this idea have a significant impact on (1) U.S. adults' sense of American exceptionalism, (2) their willingness to actively degrade other countries, and (3) their attributions of responsibility for the United States' perceived decline. We reflect on the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Keywords: American exceptionalism, international discourse, national identity, media effects, patriotism, U.S. public opinion

The idea that the United States is a special country—one that is unique, admired, and, in some ways, superior to the rest of the global community—is a concept that has lived a long and vibrant life in U.S. politics (Madsen, 1998). For years, U.S. politicians—and journalists—have trumpeted the notion of American exceptionalism, so much so that this idea has become deeply embedded within the psyche of the American public (Edwards, 2008; Gilmore, Sheets, & Rowling, 2016; Neumann & Coe, 2011). Nonetheless, many have recently suggested that the United States might be losing its edge—in terms of both its hard and soft power—within the international system. Take for example Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump's 2016 campaign platform, which was based on the idea that Americans need to "Make America Great Again" because the country had, according to him, been in constant decline since before the Obama administration. Challenges to the idea of American exceptionalism are not, however, confined to the American body politic. Increasingly, many foreign sources have begun to challenge the

Jason Gilmore: jason.gilmore@usu.edu

Charles M. Rowling: rowlingcm@unk.edu

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notion of American exceptionalism. Perhaps the most visible or blatant foreign challenge to American exceptionalism occurred on September 11, 2013, when Russian president Vladimir Putin penned an op-ed in *The New York Times* in which he repudiated President Barack Obama's repeated claims of American exceptionalism. Specifically, Putin (2013) wrote:

It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still fighting for their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal. (p. A31)

Thus, according to Putin, the United States is *not* exceptional; it is merely one among many equals.

Numerous scholars have explored the distinct ways—and to what ends—American exceptionalism has been highlighted in U.S. public discourse (Edwards, 2008; Edwards & Weiss, 2011; Gilmore, 2014; Gilmore et al., 2016; Ivie & Giner, 2009; Neumann & Coe, 2011; Pease, 2009). Indeed, this work has shown that the notion that America is unique, superior, and perhaps God-favored within the international system has been pervasive in both the construction and maintenance of American identity throughout the country's history. More recently, research has begun to explore the impact of such discourse on how Americans view themselves in relation to the rest of the world and in their broader attitudes toward U.S. foreign policies. Specifically, Gilmore (2015) found that, whereas such messages can have positive impacts on people's sense of national pride, they can also rouse severe ethnocentric attitudes. Minimal research, however, has sought to empirically examine the effects that explicit challenges to American exceptionalism might have on U.S. public opinion. Such work, we argue, is critically important for several reasons. First, challenges to American exceptionalism within the international system have become more pronounced both in terms of scope and severity over the last decade or so. Second, the sources of these challenges—from bitter rivals to traditional allies—have been varied. Third, given that American exceptionalism is such a deeply held and widely accepted belief among U.S. citizens, how Americans might respond to these threats can likely offer insight into the political forces and psychological processes that drive U.S. national identity and public opinion about U.S. foreign policy.

We conducted an experiment in which a large sample of U.S. adults was exposed to messages from foreign leaders that call into question the notion of American exceptionalism. Specifically, drawing on social identity theory, we explore the psychological dynamics that shape how Americans might respond to statements that explicitly challenge American exceptionalism, depending on whether such challenges come from competitor countries (e.g., China and Britain) or noncompetitor countries (e.g., Mexico and Australia). Our findings suggest that challenges to this idea have a significant impact on (1) Americans' sense of American exceptionalism, (2) their willingness to actively degrade other countries, and (3) their attribution of responsibility for the United States' apparent decline. We reflect on the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

American Exceptionalism and Social Identity Theory

At its core, American exceptionalism is the belief that the United States is a singular, superior, and even God-favored country in the international community (Gilmore, 2014; Lipset, 1996). Research in social psychology suggests that this belief is a product of the social identification process. Specifically, social identity theory posits that individuals tend to understand or conceptualize their own personal identity through their membership in the valued social groups to which they belong (Tajfel, 1982). Individuals also do more than simply identify with these social groups; they derive comfort, self-esteem, and security from them as well (Rivenburgh, 2000). Social identities can take many forms—familial, partisan, gender, ethnic, religious. Certainly one of the more powerful and pervasive forms of social identity is national identity, because, as Anderson contends, the nation commands “profound emotional legitimacy” among citizens (1983, p. 4). Indeed, citizens are regularly confronted with cultural myths, stories, and narratives designed to affirm and bolster their identities as members of the nation (Bar-Tal, 2005; Bloom, 1990). This emotional legitimacy, in turn, tends to drive citizens to engage in the protection or enhancement of the nation whenever it is perceived to be threatened—either physically or, in the case of rhetorical challenges to American exceptionalism from abroad, psychologically. Often this involves what Bandura (1990) has referred to as engaging in “advantageous comparisons” in which citizens express positive evaluations of their own nation and, at the same time, negative evaluations of other nations.

American exceptionalism is a particularly powerful type of advantageous comparison because it both paints the country in a positive light *and* positions it above all other countries by comparison. This need to position one’s own group hierarchically above other groups stems from what Tajfel and Turner (1986) describe as creative, power-based maneuvering in intergroup comparisons. Specifically, they argue that there is a perceived hierarchical structure to intergroup relations and that each group’s—or in this case, country’s—status is determined through comparisons with other groups. In other words, some countries are identified as being hierarchically above or “superior to” others. According to Tajfel (1981), these standings are at least implicitly agreed on by the community of nations involved in the comparison. With the end of the Cold War, many agreed that the United States had emerged as the world’s sole superpower (Bacevich, 2008). This hierarchical position, however, has its drawbacks. In fact, Tajfel (1981) argues that “superior” national groups are more likely to feel their status to be tenuous and at risk:

A completely secure social identity for a group consensually considered as “superior” is nearly an empirical impossibility. The kind of psychological distinctiveness that would insure their unchallenged superiority must not only be gained; it must also be preserved. And it can only be preserved if social conditions of distinctiveness are carefully perpetuated, together with the signs and symbols of distinctive status without which the attitudes of complete consensus about “superior” distinctiveness are in danger of disintegrating. (p. 278)

With its political, economic, and cultural influence in the world, the United States is both blessed with and challenged by having a superior or exceptional national identity. Because the American people want to continue to believe that their country is exceptional, they are tasked with maintaining that image in the face of constant international competition and challenges.

Challenges or threats to a nation's image can profoundly affect how citizens come to understand, evaluate, and respond to the nation and its actions. Research indicates, for example, that citizens are likely to engage in behavior designed to protect or enhance the nation in such situations (Chang, 1997; Gilmore, Meeks, & Domke, 2013; Lipstadt, 1994; Marques, Paez, & Sera, 1997; Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006). Several studies have found that U.S. citizens react strongly in response to messages—whether from internal or external sources—that threaten the image of the United States. Rowling and colleagues (2011, 2015) have shown, for example, that much of U.S. political and news discourse surrounding the 1968 My Lai Massacre and the 2004 Abu Ghraib prison scandal minimized the severity of these incidents and served to reaffirm Americans' belief in the superior virtues and ideals of the nation. Furthermore, Gilmore et al. (2013) found that when exposed to messages highlighting anti-American sentiment among foreign populations, Americans can react in both positive and negative ways, attributing blame for these attitudes on foreigners' envy of Americans and the foreigners' collective ignorance. We are, therefore, interested in whether these dynamics might also manifest when Americans are exposed to messages that challenge American exceptionalism.

Consistent with social identity theory, we posit that challenges to American exceptionalism are likely to activate a specific form of in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) or ethnocentric (Kinder & Kam, 2009) bias known as "national exceptionalism bias" (Gilmore, 2015). National exceptionalism bias manifests in two fundamental ways. The first involves an *exceptionalism worldview*, which includes the belief that the nation (in this case, the United States) is the exception in world affairs—for example, it is unique, superior, and God-favored. The second involves outright *degradation of other countries*. Indeed, it is one thing to believe or say that the United States is the greatest country on Earth, but quite another to believe or be willing to say that other countries are inferior by comparison. In particular, this includes explicit classification of other countries as being ordinary, inferior, and out of favor with God. Thus, the national exceptionalism bias connects the belief that one's own country is exceptional (*unique, superior, or God-favored*) with the idea that all other countries are *not* exceptional by comparison. It is, in effect, the ultimate example of an advantageous comparison because it works to paint the host nation in not only a positive light (e.g., great) but an *exceptionally* positive one (e.g., greatest) while simultaneously and overtly denigrating all other nations.

In essence, we expect that these two components of the national exceptionalism bias are likely to be triggered among citizens when confronted with international challenges to American exceptionalism, but in different ways. Because the exceptionalism worldview component pertains to the extent to which citizens believe that the nation is unique, superior, or God-favored, explicit challenges to these ideas, we argue, are likely to lead citizens to accept at least some of this criticism. In particular, given that such messages are designed to prompt citizens to doubt the validity of American exceptionalism, it is to be expected that American exceptionalism worldviews would likely decrease in response. As several studies have shown, exposure to ideas that explicitly contradict what might be deeply held beliefs serves to induce individuals to critically assess these preconceived notions and, in the process, diminish their acceptance of them (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). Nonetheless, we also expect such challenges to simultaneously spur among citizens a desire to defend or bolster the national identity in response. As research suggests, the act of accepting a negative evaluation of the nation often carries with it a need among citizens to engage in cognitive strategies designed to positively restore the

image of the nation through degrading other groups (Bandura, 1990; Gilmore et al., 2013). This would include, in the present case, the denigration of other countries relative to the nation. In effect, this would serve to mitigate any damage that might have been done to the image of the nation by highlighting negative features associated with other nations. Thus, a gap should emerge, we argue, between worldview exceptionalism and degradation of other countries among citizens when exposed to international challenges to American exceptionalism. We offer our first hypothesis:

H1: U.S. adults will tend to have a heightened gap between their national exceptionalism worldview and their belief in national exceptionalism via degradation of others when they are exposed to international challenges to American exceptionalism than when not exposed to any challenge.

At the same time, we are interested in the potential impact that the source of these challenges—whether from a competitor or noncompetitor nation—might have on Americans' national exceptionalism bias. Again, at its core, the idea of American exceptionalism is about actively positioning the United States above all other countries, a dynamic that is consistent with what Tajfel and Turner (1986) refer to as creative power maneuvering through intergroup comparisons. Again, as Tajfel (1981) suggests, countries deemed to be hierarchically superior in social comparisons tend to exhibit much more tenuous or insecure senses of national identity because they are the targets of competition from other countries. For this reason, a country that resides atop the hierarchical ladder in international relations is compelled to constantly and aggressively position itself in such a way that allows for it to maintain its elite status. Thus, should a challenge to American exceptionalism arise from a country considered to be a strong competitive and influential force in the international community (e.g., China or Britain) and one that is considered a strong economic competitor to the United States, we should expect a heightened sense of insecurity among citizens in response. In contrast, should the challenge come from a weaker, noncompetitive nation (e.g., Mexico or Australia), the perception of threat felt among Americans should be significantly less pronounced. This stems from the fact that countries such as China and Britain possess much more power both militarily and economically than countries such as Mexico and Australia, and, thus, they can more legitimately compete with the United States in the international system. As a result, we expect significant differences in the responses among Americans to challenges to American exceptionalism depending on whether the challenge originates from a competitor or noncompetitor nation.

In particular, we expect the comparative effects of these challenges to be twofold. First, given that challenges to American exceptionalism from competitor nations are likely to be perceived as more threatening and, thus, likely to elicit a more visceral reaction from Americans, we expect for U.S. respondents to exhibit a heightened sense of American exceptionalism via the degradation of others when exposed to such messages. Second, such challenges from noncompetitor nations are likely to be perceived as less threatening, and, as a result, Americans are likely to be more receptive to these challenges—that is, more willing to consider and, indeed, accept the idea that the United States is not as exceptional as it once was. With this in mind, we offer our second set of hypotheses:

H2a: U.S. adults will tend to have higher national exceptionalism via degradation of others when they are exposed to messages from competitor nations that challenge American exceptionalism.

H2b: U.S. adults will tend to have a lower national exceptionalism worldview when they are exposed to messages from noncompetitor nations that challenge American exceptionalism.

Challenges to American Exceptionalism and Attributions of Responsibility

We are also interested in exploring the differential impact of these types of messages on the attributions of responsibility that U.S. adults might use when attempting to come to terms with the idea that the United States is on the decline within the international arena. Attributions of responsibility are a core component of how people seek to explain the actions of both their own nation and others. According to Tajfel (1981), national attachment leads citizens to make "constant causal attributions about the processes responsible" (p. 137) for the successes or failures of their own nation as well as others. This was evident in the work of Gilmore et al. (2013), who found that when Americans were confronted with evidence of anti-Americanism in the world, how they attributed responsibility for this reality was dependent on the nature of the criticism directed toward the United States. Specifically, the more hostile the criticisms of the United States, the more receptive Americans were to explanations that placed the blame on foreigners rather than on the United States. Likewise, the less hostile the criticism of the United States, the more inclined Americans were to accept part of the blame for perceived anti-American sentiment. In essence, the more U.S. adults perceived the image of the nation to be threatened, the more likely they were to deflect blame and attribute responsibility to others. Furthermore, Iyengar (1994, 1996) argues that political messages have profound impacts on how U.S. adults attribute responsibility about political issues ranging from domestic issues such as racial inequality and unemployment to international issues such as terrorism.

In this study, we are interested in exploring whether the source of the challenge to American exceptionalism—from a competitor or noncompetitor nation—might differentially affect how Americans assign responsibility for the United States's perceived waning influence in world affairs. Similar to our expectations surrounding the national exceptionalism bias, we suspect that challenges to American exceptionalism from competitor nations are likely to evoke greater insecurity among Americans and, as a result, a desire to protect or bolster the image of the nation. Such challenges, then, are more likely to spur Americans to displace responsibility for the United States's perceived decline onto foreigners. In contrast, we expect that Americans will be more open to accepting responsibility for declining U.S. influence in the world when challenged to do so by noncompetitive nations. This stems from the fact that such challenges are likely to be seen as less threatening to American exceptionalism than if they were to originate from a competitor nation. We, therefore, offer our third set of hypotheses:

H3a: U.S. adults will be more likely to blame other countries (external attributions of blame) for the United States's decline in world affairs when they are exposed to messages from competitor nations that challenge American exceptionalism.

H3b: U.S. adults will be more likely to blame the United States (internal attributions of blame) for its decline in world affairs when they are exposed to messages from noncompetitor nations that challenge American exceptionalism.

The Partisan Difference

Finally, we are interested in exploring whether respondents' political party affiliation will moderate the impact of challenges to American exceptionalism. Republican attributions of responsibility (external or internal), for example, might be affected differently by challenges to American exceptionalism than those of their Democratic counterparts. Although neither political orientation owns the idea of American exceptionalism, research has shown that political conservatives tend to be affected by patriotic ideas and messages in different ways than liberals. In a study examining distinct types of patriotic feelings, Schatz, Staub, and Lavine (1999) found political conservatives to hold more overtly uncritical patriotic views, whereas liberals tended to be more critical in their patriotic outlooks. Furthermore, Gilmore et al. (2013) found that when exposed to uncritical patriotic news messages about anti-Americanism, conservatives tended to react in harsher ways toward foreign publics than their liberal counterparts. Moreover, in U.S. politics, the issue of patriotism—or strong affinity for one's country—is also an outlook that political conservatives regularly claim to be one of their fortes (Andrews, 1997). It is likely, then, that challenges to such a patriotic feeling as American exceptionalism might serve as a partisan cue for Republicans, therefore making their partisan identities salient. We would expect Republicans, in turn, to be affected more by messages that directly challenge their sense of patriotism and national exceptionalism than their Democratic counterparts. We would, therefore, expect the effects explained above to be amplified among Republicans. We offer our final set of hypotheses:

- H4a: Republicans will be more likely than Democrats to engage in internal attributions of blame for the United States's decline in world affairs when they are exposed to messages from noncompetitor nations that challenge American exceptionalism.*
- H4b: Republicans will be more likely than Democrats to engage in external attributions of blame for America's decline in world affairs when they are exposed to messages from competitor nations that challenge American exceptionalism.*
- H4c: Republicans will be more likely than Democrats to have a lower national exceptionalism worldview when they are exposed to messages from noncompetitor nations that challenge American exceptionalism.*
- H4d: Republicans will be more likely than Democrats to have a stronger sense of national exceptionalism via the degradation of others when they are exposed to messages from competitor nations that challenge American exceptionalism.*

Method

To examine these relationships, we conducted an experiment of U.S. adults from a nationally sampled pool of participants recruited through the online survey company SurveyMonkey. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of five experimental conditions. In four of the conditions, respondents were asked to read a news article, and then fill out a questionnaire. All articles simulated actual news reports by *Newsweek*. Each one reported exclusively on a foreign head of state's declaration that the United States was no longer "number one" in world affairs. Each condition included quotes and paraphrasing from the foreign leader reinforcing these challenges to American exceptionalism (see example in the Appendix). Two of the conditions were attributed to leaders from competitor countries (China and Britain), and two were from noncompetitor countries (Mexico and Australia). To be clear, the only change was the source country. The four conditions were set up to test the potential impact that a country's standing in the world might have on how U.S. adults respond to challenges to American exceptionalism. In the fifth condition, respondents were not presented with a news story, but were asked only to fill out a questionnaire.

A total of 1,398 adults completed the survey. The population was slightly more male (53%) and consisted predominantly of white respondents (87.5%), followed by African Americans (3.5%), Asian Americans (2.8%), Native Americans (0.9%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders (0.4%), and unidentified or mixed ethnic groups (4.5%). The mean age of participants was between 50 and 59. The population was slightly more Christian (65.3%) than non-Christian. Education was measured on a 6-point scale (*Mdn* = 5.0, bachelor degree; *Mode* = 5.0, bachelor degree). Income was measured on an 11-point scale (*Mdn* = 6.00, \$50,000–\$59,999). Political party was measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from *strong Republican* to *strong Democrat* (*M* = 3.15, *SD* = 1.20).

We ran reliability tests on the composite variables central to the study. All items were measured on the following 4-point scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*. First, we tested the reliability of the two separate components of the national exceptionalism bias (Gilmore, 2015). The first component—American exceptionalism worldview—included the following 10 measures: "Americans are a uniquely blessed people" (*M* = 2.71, *SD* = 0.87); "God has chosen the United States to be the strongest force for good in the world" (*M* = 1.86, *SD* = 0.90); "America does things differently than the rest of the world" (*M* = 2.92, *SD* = 0.60); "America has a unique set of values that sets it apart from the world" (*M* = 2.64, *SD* = 0.77); "The American people are the greatest people in the world" (*M* = 2.31, *SD* = 0.82); "America is the greatest country on earth" (*M* = 2.99, *SD* = 0.84); "The United States is uniquely different from every other country on Earth" (*M* = 3.09, *SD* = 0.74); "In the eyes of God, the United States is the same as all other countries" (reverse-coded, *M* = 2.00, *SD* = 0.92); "The United States has a special role to play in the world" (*M* = 3.03, *SD* = 0.68); and "The United States is the most important country in the world" (*M* = 2.41, *SD* = 0.86). We combined all these items into a composite variable ($\alpha = .81$).

The second component of national exceptionalism bias—degradation of others—consisted of the following measures: "In comparison to the United States, other countries are simply inferior" (*M* = 2.16, *SD* = 0.73); "People from other countries wish they were as fortunate as Americans are" (*M* = 2.80, *SD* =

0.68); "People in other countries don't value freedom like we do in the United States" ($M = 2.11, SD = 0.84$); "In the eyes of God, other countries are not as favored as the United States" ($M = 1.67, SD = 0.68$); "Other countries have inferior values to those in the United States" ($M = 2.04, SD = 0.73$); "Every country is exceptional in its own way" (reverse-coded, $M = 1.75, SD = 0.66$); "Other governments are weaker than the United States government" ($M = 1.93, SD = 0.62$); and "Other countries are not as unique as the United States" ($M = 2.34, SD = 0.71$). We combined all these items into a composite variable ($\alpha = .80$).

We then tested the reliability of two categories of measures used to assess respondents' views about why the United States is losing influence in world affairs—one emphasizing the responsibility of the United States and one emphasizing the responsibility of foreign countries. Each category contained five measures. For attributions of responsibility toward the United States, the questionnaire included the following measures: "There are many flaws in the U.S. government" ($M = 3.18, SD = 0.61$); "The United States is too aggressive with its military" ($M = 2.69, SD = 0.82$); "The United States is not respectful of opinions expressed in other countries" ($M = 2.71, SD = 0.77$); "The United States acts too often without talking to other countries" ($M = 2.59, SD = 0.74$); and "The United States ignores or bypasses the United Nations" ($M = 2.36, SD = 0.68$). For attributions of responsibility toward foreign countries, the questionnaire included the following measures: "Other countries dislike American freedom" ($M = 2.27, SD = 0.75$); "Other countries are jealous of the power of the United States" ($M = 2.73, SD = 0.72$); "Other governments try to make the United States look bad" ($M = 2.70, SD = 0.69$); "Other countries want to stop America from being number one" ($M = 2.78, SD = 0.72$); and "Other countries focus more on the bad things that America does than the good" ($M = 2.86, SD = 0.68$). Two composite variables were constructed: *internal* ($\alpha = .76$) and *external* attributions ($\alpha = .81$).

Results

National Exceptionalism Bias

Our first hypothesis was that respondents who were exposed to challenges to American exceptionalism would express a lower exceptionalism worldview *and* a higher degradation of other countries than those who are not exposed to any message. To assess this expectation, we examined the overall mean scores between these two components of the national exceptionalism bias (degradation of others minus exceptionalism worldview). Responses on the dependent variables ranged from -3.87 to 3.56 . The results are shown in Table 1.

The data shown in Table 1 reveal several important findings. The top row indicates that, overall, there were significant differences between the experimental conditions. Specifically, Tukey post hoc comparisons of the analysis of variance showed that those who were exposed to challenges from noncompetitive countries had significantly wider gaps in their national exceptionalism bias than those in the control condition ($M = 0.140$ vs. $M = -0.152, p < .001$). This impact was similar between those who were exposed to challenges from competitor countries and those in the control condition ($M = 0.028$ vs. $M = -0.152, p < .01$). These findings suggest, then, that when leaders from foreign countries challenge

American exceptionalism directly, such messages influence U.S. adults to consider the distinct components of the national exceptionalism bias in a more independent manner. This finding supports Hypothesis 1.

Table 1. Analysis of Variance Mean Scores for National Exceptionalism Bias Among All Three Experimental Conditions.

	Competitor country threat	Noncompetitor country threat	Control (no message)
Gap in national exceptionalism bias	0.028 ^a (<i>n</i> = 453)	0.140 ^a (<i>n</i> = 434)	-0.152 ^b (<i>n</i> = 484)
$F(2, 1372) = 12.29, p = .000, \eta_p^2 = .015$			
American exceptionalism worldview	0.030 ^a (<i>n</i> = 474)	-0.078 ^a (<i>n</i> = 445)	0.035 ^a (<i>n</i> = 506)
$F(2, 1422) = 1.86, p = ns$			
Degradation of others	0.071 ^a (<i>n</i> = 465)	0.016 ^{ab} (<i>n</i> = 446)	-0.096 ^b (<i>n</i> = 507)
$F(2, 1415) = 3.61, p = .027, \eta_p^2 = .005$			

Note. Means with different superscripts were found to be significantly different from one another in Tukey post hoc tests, at a minimum of $p < .05$.

Next, we sought to delve deeper into the psychological tendencies embedded in the national exceptionalism bias by exploring what impact the source of these challenges might have on people's attitudes. We expected that survey respondents would tend to have lower American exceptionalism worldviews when they are exposed to challenges from noncompetitor nations than those who are exposed to such challenges from competitor nations (H2a). Additionally, we expected that respondents would be more likely to engage in degradation of others when exposed to challenges from competitor nations than those exposed to such challenges from noncompetitor nations (H2b). To measure these effects, we ran one-way analysis of variance means tests on each separate component of the cognitive bias—American exceptionalism worldview and degradation of other countries. Responses on the dependent variables ranged from -2.89 to 2.90 for American exceptionalism worldview and -2.40 to 3.99 for degradation of others. These results are also included in Table 1.

Two findings should be highlighted. First, the bottom two rows of Table 1 indicate that, when isolated, there were no significant differences on the exceptionalism worldview measure across the three

conditions. This result is notable because it suggests that when confronted with an explicit challenge to American exceptionalism, respondents stood fast in their belief in American exceptionalism—that is, it did not significantly diminish their acceptance of American exceptionalism, regardless of the source of the challenge. It would appear, then, that this component of the national exceptionalism bias might be a core dispositional belief within the minds of Americans that is not susceptible to change when confronted with explicit challenges. Second, the third row in Table 1 indicates differential effects on the degradation of others measure depending on the source of the challenge to American exceptionalism. Specifically, Tukey post hoc tests reveal that respondents who are exposed to challenges to American exceptionalism by competitor countries exhibited a significantly stronger tendency to degrade other countries than those in the control condition ($M = 0.071$ vs. $M = -.096$, $p < .05$). This was not the case, however, when respondents were exposed to noncompetitor countries challenges and those in the control condition ($M = 0.016$ vs. $M = -.096$, $p = ns$) conditions. These findings suggest that challenges to American exceptionalism by a competitor nation, as opposed to a noncompetitor nation, tend to trigger among Americans a desire to actively degrade other countries in comparison to their own. This result, therefore, lends support for Hypothesis 2b.

Internal and External Attributions of Responsibility

Our next step was to explore the impact of challenges to American exceptionalism on people's attitudes about why the United States is losing influence in world affairs. In particular, we expected that challenges from competitor nations would spur an increased willingness among respondents to engage in external attributions of responsibility (i.e., blame other countries). We also expected that such challenges from noncompetitor nations would lead to a greater willingness among respondents to engage in internal attributions for responsibility (i.e., blame the United States). To assess these responses, we ran two one-way analysis of variance means tests on each attribution of responsibility. Responses on the dependent variables ranged from -3.09 to 2.50 for external attributions and from -3.25 to 2.47 for internal attributions. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis of Variance Mean Scores for Internal and External Attributions of Responsibility for Why the United States Is Losing Influence in the World, Among All Three Experimental Conditions.

	Competitor country threat	Noncompetitor country threat	Control (no message)
Internal attributions of responsibility	0.015 ^a ($n = 484$)	0.020 ^a ($n = 454$)	-0.035 ^a ($n = 501$)
	$F(2, 1436) = .47, p = ns$		
External attributions of responsibility	0.046 ^a ($n = 477$)	0.062 ^a ($n = 453$)	-0.044 ^a ($n = 498$)
	$F(2, 1425) = 1.57, p = ns$		

Note. Means with different superscripts were found to be significantly different from one another in Tukey post hoc tests, at a minimum of $p < .05$.

The findings displayed in Table 2 do not support Hypothesis 3. Specifically, as shown in the first and second rows, there were no significant differences between experimental conditions on either of the dependent variables. We, therefore, turn to Hypothesis 4 to examine whether the effects of these messages might have been moderated by respondents' party affiliation.

We expected that Republican respondents would be more likely than their Democrat counterparts to exhibit a strong reaction to challenges to American exceptionalism. Specifically, we expected Republican respondents to be more likely to engage in internal attributions of responsibility when exposed to challenges from noncompetitor nations and more likely to engage in external attributions of responsibility when exposed to challenges from competitor nations compared to Democrat respondents. Again, we ran two one-way analysis of variance means tests on each attribution of responsibility. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparing Analysis of Variance Mean Scores Between Democrats and Republicans for National Exceptionalism Bias, Among All Three Experimental Conditions.

	Competitor country threat	Noncompetitor country threat	Control (no message)
Internal attributions	Republican respondents	-0.462 ^{ab} (<i>n</i> = 134)	-0.570 ^b (<i>n</i> = 138)
	$F(2, 378) = 2.78, p = .063, \eta_p^2 = .015$		
	Democratic respondents	0.293 ^a (<i>n</i> = 167)	0.130 ^a (<i>n</i> = 180)
$F(2, 509) = 1.36, p = ns$			
External attributions	Republican respondents	0.568 ^a (<i>n</i> = 131)	0.280 ^b (<i>n</i> = 141)
	$F(2, 379) = 3.92, p = .021, \eta_p^2 = .020$		
	Democratic respondents	-0.283 ^a (<i>n</i> = 164)	-0.289 ^a (<i>n</i> = 179)
$F(2, 505) = 1.00, p = ns$			

Note. Means with different superscripts were found to be significantly different from one another in Tukey post hoc tests, at a minimum of $p < .05$.

We begin by exploring the relationship between challenges to American exceptionalism and respondents' tendency to engage in *internal* attributions of responsibility. There are three important findings we wish to highlight in the top section of Table 3 regarding this relationship. First, we found that among Republican respondents, messages from noncompetitor nations sparked a significantly stronger willingness to accept some internal responsibility than in the control condition ($M = -0.308$ vs. $M = -0.570$, $p < .05$). This was not the case, however, for Republican respondents who were exposed to challenges from competitor nations versus the control condition ($M = -0.462$ vs. $M = -0.570$, $p = ns$). Second, the findings in the second row indicate that similar effects did not occur among Democratic respondents. This suggests, then, that Republicans might be more receptive to the idea that the United States is to blame for its decline in the international system, but only when challenges to American exceptionalism come from noncompetitive nations. Third, we see that, across all conditions, Republicans are significantly less likely than Democrats to engage in internal attributions of responsibility, $t(891) = -10.53$, $p = .000$. Thus, even though Democrats might be more willing than Republicans to accept internal responsibility, it is the Republican respondents who can be influenced to be more critical of the nation, but only when the challenge originates from a noncompetitor nation. These results lend strong support to Hypothesis 4a.

Next, we examined the relationship between challenges to American exceptionalism and people's tendency to engage in *external* attributions of responsibility. Again, there are three important findings we wish to highlight. First, as the lower section of Table 3 indicates, we found that among Republican respondents, challenges to American exceptionalism from competitor nations elicited a much greater willingness to engage in external attribution of responsibility than in the control condition ($M = 0.568$ vs. $M = 0.280$, $p < .05$). This was not the case, however, for Republican respondents who were exposed to challenges from noncompetitor countries compared to the control condition ($M = 0.494$ vs. $M = 0.280$, $p = ns$). Second, the results in the second row show that these effects were not present for Democrats. These findings, therefore, suggest that when exposed to challenges from competitor countries, Republicans are significantly more likely to place the blame on other countries for the United States's decline. Third, the results again show markedly different responses between respondents from the different political parties, with Republicans significantly more likely than Democrats to assign responsibility to other countries, $t(888) = 10.62$, $p = .000$. Overall, these results suggest that even though Republicans are already significantly more likely than Democrats to assign responsibility to foreigners, competitor messages that challenge American exceptionalism tend to amplify this tendency even further. These findings lend considerable support for Hypothesis 4b.

Finally, we examined the impact of party affiliation on the relationship between challenges to American exceptionalism and the two components of respondents' national exceptionalism bias. The findings are in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparing Analysis of Variance Mean Scores Between Democrats and Republicans for National Exceptionalism Bias, Among All Three Experimental Conditions.

	Competitor country threat	Noncompetitor country threat	Control (no message)
American exceptionalism worldview	0.619 ^a (<i>n</i> = 132)	0.449 ^a (<i>n</i> = 110)	0.593 ^a (<i>n</i> = 140)
	$F(2, 379) = 1.21, p = ns$		
	-0.300 ^a (<i>n</i> = 160)	-0.321 ^a (<i>n</i> = 160)	-0.292 ^a (<i>n</i> = 170)
	$F(2, 487) = 0.46, p = ns$		
Degradation of others	0.674 ^a (<i>n</i> = 127)	0.506 ^{ab} (<i>n</i> = 109)	0.384 ^b (<i>n</i> = 139)
	$F(2, 372) = 3.00, p = .05, \eta_p^2 = .016$		
	-0.322 ^a (<i>n</i> = 153)	-0.210 ^a (<i>n</i> = 158)	-0.409 ^a (<i>n</i> = 172)
	$F(2, 480) = 2.03, p = ns$		

Note. Means with different superscripts were found to be significantly different from one another in Tukey post hoc tests, at a minimum of $p < .05$.

There are two central findings of note. First, as we found above, the American exceptionalism worldview seemed relatively unaffected by the challenging messages. That said, the results again show markedly different responses between respondents from the different political parties, with Republicans significantly more likely than Democrats to have a heightened sense of national exceptionalism worldview, $t(930) = 14.16, p = .000$. Second, we found that Republican respondents had a significantly stronger sense of national exceptionalism via the degradation of others when they are exposed to challenges from competitor countries. This lends strong support for Hypothesis 4d. Furthermore, the results again show markedly different responses between respondents from the different political parties, with Republicans significantly more likely than Democrats to have a heightened sense of national exceptionalism via the degradation of others, $t(860) = 13.13, p = .000$. Overall, these findings suggest that Republicans are particularly sensitive to challenges to patriotic ideas and deeply held beliefs.

Discussion

This study represents the first empirical examination of the effects of challenges to American exceptionalism on U.S. public opinion. It builds on previous research, which has demonstrated the prevalence of this concept in U.S. public discourse (Edwards, 2008; Edwards & Weiss, 2011; Ivie & Giner 2009; Neumann & Coe, 2011; Pease, 2009) and its cultural resonance within the broader citizenry (Gilmore et al., 2016; Lipset, 1996; Madsen, 1998). In particular, we focus on the impact of such challenges on Americans' belief in American exceptionalism, their willingness to actively degrade other countries, and their attribution of responsibility for the United States's perceived decline. A number of important findings should be noted.

First, U.S. adults who were exposed to any type of challenge to American exceptionalism exhibited an overall shift in their belief in American exceptionalism. Specifically, we found that such challenges had differential effects on the two components of the American exceptionalism bias (Gilmore, 2015), eliciting a significant gap between respondents' American exceptionalism worldview and their willingness to degrade other countries. Thus, Americans tend to focus their attention on strengthening their own sense of American exceptionalism by degrading or "de-exceptionalizing" others. This finding is consistent with previous research in social psychology (Bandura, 1990), which has shown that in moments of group vulnerability, group members tend to engage in advantageous comparisons in an effort to reestablish the supremacy of their own group—in this case, the nation.

Second, we found that this tendency to degrade other countries when faced with challenges to American exceptionalism was exacerbated when the source of the message came from leaders of the competitor countries of China and Britain. Indeed, the same effect did not occur when such challenges came from the noncompetitor countries of Mexico and Australia. Thus, the *source* of the challenge, not just the *content* of the challenge, was pivotal in shaping responses. This underscores the importance of threat in determining the lengths to which individual citizens are willing to go to protect the identity of the nation. This builds on previous research (see Tajfel & Turner, 1986) showing how challenges from competitor groups tend to elicit a harsher response from group members.

Finally, our findings demonstrate that Republicans and Democrats were affected quite differently by these messages. Specifically, we found that when asked to attribute blame for the supposed decline of the United States, Republican respondents alone were affected by challenges to American exceptionalism. In particular, when exposed to messages from noncompetitive nations, Republicans were more likely to accept some internal attributions of responsibility. In contrast, when Republicans were confronted with such messages from competitor nations, they were more likely to engage in external attributions of blame and to outwardly degrade other countries as a part of their sense of American exceptionalism. These findings are consistent with previous scholarship (see Andrews, 1997; Schatz et al., 1999) that suggests Republicans are more likely than Democrats to engage in "uncritical patriotism," but they also reveal some nuance to these tendencies. In particular, our results suggest that Republicans might be open to criticisms of the nation, but only when prompted to do so by sources that are perceived as nonthreatening. More broadly, these findings contribute to the broader scholarly debate (see Gilmore et al., 2013; Iyengar 1994, 1996) over the distinct mechanisms through which and manner in which political messages can

affect individuals' tendencies to engage in causal attributions of responsibility on a given political issue or public policy problem.

These findings raise several important questions for future research. First, given that the evolving world order entails constant competition between powerful countries, it is unlikely that the idea of American exceptionalism will ever be without some form of national or international challenge. Future studies should explore the facets of American exceptionalism that tend to provoke the strongest defense mechanisms among Americans when challenged. It would be interesting to explore whether challenges to evidence-based aspects of American exceptionalism (e.g., largest economy, most powerful military) tend to provoke more or less intense reactions than challenges to mythological aspects (e.g., America is the beacon of hope for the rest of the world). In real-world terms, could challenges to American exceptionalism affect the American public's support for controversial policies such as increased U.S. military intervention in specific regions or stopping foreign aid to regions in need? Overall, such challenges to core American beliefs by foreign sources have more adverse impacts than expected.

Second, our findings indicate that international challenges to American exceptionalism can trigger potentially aggressive attitudes toward foreign sources. Future research should further explore these dynamics. For instance, the attitudes measured in the present study were in reaction to challenges from countries that posed varying levels of competition to the United States, but did not examine sources that are overtly hostile toward the United States. Would such challenges provoke more aggressive reactions because of the hostile nature of the challenge? Additional work should be conducted to explore the differential impact on U.S. public opinion of challenges to American exceptionalism from hostile foreign sources such as Iran or Russia. Given that we did not distinguish between respondent attitudes toward foreigners in general versus the actual source country, we could not gauge the overall target of the aggression. Future research should examine whether providing respondents with the ability to channel their degradation to the actual source of the challenge might reduce their tendency to degrade foreigners in general. Moreover, our study only examined challenges coming from foreign (or out-group) leaders, not challenges from U.S. (or in-group) leaders. Research could examine whether challenges from U.S. leaders—versus foreign sources—might mitigate the tendency among citizens to degrade other countries in reaction to such criticism and whether political orientation of the source or the respondent may also have an impact on these dynamics.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, because challenges to American exceptionalism present U.S. citizens and their leaders with opportunities to critically assess the attributes and behavior of the nation and engage in self-reflection, future scholars should examine what messages might trigger such a reaction. It is important to identify the types of messages that might prompt this type of constructive reaction without the corresponding harsh degradation of foreign cultures and countries. Can messages that combine both a reification of American exceptionalism with constructive critiques of the nation ameliorate these more negative effects? Also, can the source of these critiques—from a respondent's own political persuasion, for instance—influence a more introspective reaction? Future research should examine the distinct types of messages that might challenge Americans to be more reflexive and critical about their own country without necessarily triggering any form of negative backlash. Without question, these are all critical facets worthy of future scholarly examination.

Overall, our findings contribute to the ongoing academic conversation about the centrality of American exceptionalism in U.S. public discourse and its impact on public opinion. In an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, which forces Americans to regularly come into contact with messages from around the globe, it is important to understand how Americans are likely to process criticisms of their country. This is perhaps more important to understand considering that these same psychological dynamics play out in very similar ways among U.S. politicians and public leaders. Take for example the fact that many Republican leaders, including Donald Trump, have relentlessly challenged Barack Obama's belief in American exceptionalism and have asserted that Obama has used his presidency to destroy the United States's exceptional global standing. This is particularly important considering how much power the United States currently wields in international affairs. If the reaction to criticism among Americans and their political leaders is to lash out at each other and at other countries instead of engaging in a critical assessment of the nation, opportunities for bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the United States could diminish. Indeed, the United States's standing in the world is likely to suffer as a result. It is, therefore, critically important to further evaluate what types of challenges to the country are likely to spur introspective, productive responses from Americans versus those that induce outright hostility toward others.

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Appendix: Sample Manipulation

Newsweek

The World in Brief

China Says America Is No Longer 'No. 1'

Is this really the end of American exceptionalism?

Jacob Newhouse - March 6, 2015

In a press conference in Beijing on Monday, Chinese government officials declared that America's time as the world's most powerful country is over. Pointing to a number of what they called "telltale" signs, including America's continued economic recession, Chinese officials declared that global dominance is now shifting to other rising powers such as China and the European Union.

"Along almost every important dimension—industrial, financial, social, cultural—American dominance is going away," said Yang Jiechi, China's Foreign Minister, "The rest of the world is not only catching up with the United States, it's already surpassing it on many levels."

As if that wasn't enough, the Minister added that other nations have stopped looking to the United States as the moral authority in world affairs.

"The United States is no longer the 'shining city on the hill' that it once was," Jiechi said. "The world has watched the United States selfishly and aggressively pursue its own interests with little regard for other national governments or cultural differences. This is not what the world wants in a leader."

A report released by the Chinese foreign ministry claims the United States has lost credibility in a number of traditional strongholds. For instance, the United States was once considered to be a model of democratic excellence, but the report suggests that emerging democracies now look to European countries—and not the United States—as models for their own democratic institutions and processes.

The report also suggests that others now view countries like Canada or Germany as ideal models for how governments should take care of their people, citing their strong social programs and their impeccable human rights records as the reason.

"Many people around the world now think of the United States as too individualistic, too closed off, and, yes, too imperialistic," Jiechi said. "The world has more options to choose from now, more examples to follow."

This picture painted by the Chinese government points to a global landscape that is quite different from the one Americans have lived in for the past half-century or so. But it is one that we will most likely have to get used to, and quick.

"It's hard to deny anymore," Jiechi said. "The United States' time at No. 1 is clearly over."