Exceptionalism in American Press

The question of American exceptionalism in the United States and abroad today is often heavily politicized in certain mediums like television, in ways that are apparent even at a glance. Often much more subtle in portraying America in an exceptional light are newspapers and the press in general. These exceptionalist tendencies can be seen in many aspects of reporting, but perhaps most notably in the discourse surrounding the ideas of independence and interdependence and their roles in the decision making of the United States, which will be discussed further in this paper. Another common thread throughout *The Washington Post, The Chicago Tribune, The Christian Science Monitor* and the *New York Times* is the constant referencing to the Founding Fathers, especially around Independence Day itself. The differing narratives that each paper presents of the Founding Fathers will be addressed, because the ways in which the work of the Founding Fathers is presented is often indicative of the papers’ view of America. Lastly, the idea of exceptionalism itself will be looked at, as some papers are much more explicit than others in their view of the ‘proper’ role of America both internationally and domestically.
Independence or Interdependence: The Role of America

The issue of independence in America is as old as the country itself. Yet, it could be argued that for just as long, the issue of interdependence has been at the forefront of the minds of many. The idea of independence has turned so quintessentially American that imagining a world without a free and independent America is impossible, especially in the view of The Chicago Tribune. Overwhelmingly, the view present in The Chicago Tribune is vastly different from the views of the other papers, most likely due to the right leaning tendencies of the Tribune. The value that the Tribune placed on ensuring and retaining American independence greatly surpassed that of the other papers emphasis’ on interdependence and flexibility in the times of great conflict and crisis. Generally, the position of the Tribune in regards to American independence is that an isolationist America is strongest. This is illustrated in an editorial from 1950:

“Above all, the good habit of American independence would not have been broken. (. . .) American independence was a boon to the American people and the world. The abandonment of independence has promoted bloodshed, dictatorships, alliances for war, and political and social instability everywhere.” ¹

An exceptionalist view of America can be seen through this quote, though perhaps subtly. Stating that “American independence was a boon to the American people and the world” insinuates that the United States is a model country, one that is constantly appreciated by those ‘less fortunate’ than America, which is not the case.

Especially in earlier years, the Tribune was very vocal in its disapproval of international involvement and the idea of interdependence and could constantly be seen defending what it

¹ “The Good Habit of Independence,” The Chicago Tribune, 4 July 1950, (CHT_19500704)
viewed to be a traditional Fourth of July. It is made very clear in earlier editorials by the *Tribune* that an appropriate Independence Day celebration should be filled with the ‘right’ kind of patriotism, which in 1936 was a subject of debate, “This transformation in tactics from open attack on American morale to bogus patriotism has been forced by the patriotic organizations, conspicuously the Legion, and by the loyal press. But the purpose of subversion remains and with it the need for the defense of Americanism remains.” ² While other papers during the same time period spoke eloquently about the merits of peaceful and interconnected world, the *Tribune* argued for ‘minding our own business.’

In recent years the blessing of independence have been forgotten, especially, it often seems to us, by churchmen. In this generation, thousands of sermons have been preached in praise of what be called the new dependence. America, it was said, has no higher mission than to bleed and impoverish herself in foreign quarrels, but this monstrous perversion of the meaning of July 4th, we may hope, is no longer fashionable in the pulpit or anywhere else. Surely the people of this country have learned from the Korean experience to see that the greatest boon which national independence can confer is the freedom it gives us to mind our own business. ³

This idea of “minding our own business” also further conveys how the *Tribune* views the Fourth of July. To the *Tribune*, the Fourth is not an appropriate place to use American ideals to promote international involvement. The Fourth is better suited to a widespread reflection upon U.S history and a greater appreciation of what it means to be an American.

The main difference in the narrative of the Fourth of July and its values that *The Chicago Tribune* presents when compared to other papers is that the meaning of the Fourth is independence, and very little else. Where other papers like *The Washington Post* have argued that during the Fourth, America needs to redefine its position as the ‘defender of freedom,’ the

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² “A Patriotic Rite,” *The Chicago Tribune*, 4 July 1936, (CHT_19360704)
³ “The Course of Human Events,” *The Chicago Tribune*, 4 July 1951 (CHT_19510704)
Tribune maintains that in order to even be considered America, the country and its citizens need to stay loyal to the idea of independence and all that is has wrought since the founding of the country. Even with the Tribune so staunchly defending isolationism, it’s also necessary to remember that the idea of independence translates to far more than debating whether or not to be involved in international conflict, especially during the Fourth of July. As all the newspapers allude to, declaring independence was the foundation of a nation that fights for what it believes in, calls for self-evident truths and even brings complete strangers together in an annual celebration of brotherhood and patriotism.

This unabashed celebrating of Independence Day is very clearly seen in The Christian Science Monitor the most often, an example being, “Americans have always loved celebration of their Independence Day. It is a time to be reminded, whatever the adversities of the moment that the United States is endowed with a glorious history of democracy. (…) Somehow, amid the din of July Fourth picnics, parades, and fireworks, the American people drop their everyday concerns long enough to link hands and feel themselves a privileged nation.” 4 Though at the time of the founding the idea of independence was very clearly and closely linked to freedom from Britain’s tyranny, it could be argued at least from the perspective of the Christian Science Monitor, Washington Post, and New York Times that independence also implies a sense of togetherness and celebration.

Much different than the view of The Chicago Tribune is that of The New York Times when it comes to a discussion of interdependence and its place in American society. Where the Tribune would consider forming relationships with other countries a weakness, the New York

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*Times* in particular very vociferously editorializes in support of the idea. This support comes most often when American involvement is seen as contentious, whether it be in conflict overseas, or even whether or not to be involved in the formation of various international organizations. The New York Times made a particularly strong argument for the necessity of interdependence in 1926:

> Independence Day this year is crowded with proofs that at this stage of the world no nation liveth unto itself. (. . .) The injury of one nation is the suffering of all others. Whether we like it or not, the watch word of the world order into which we are fully coming after 50 years of independence is interdependence. ⁵

This emphasis on interdependence came at a time of international stability that the world hadn’t seen for quite some time. Rather than predominately focusing on problems within a country, nations were able to look outside of their own borders and allow others’ problems to become their own in pursuit of peace and happiness for all. More often than not, taking on the problems of other nations became an American issue, perhaps because The United States has effectively put itself in a position where they are believed to be one of the few who could help at all. This concept of interdependence remains consistent throughout time as well in the *New York Times*, and more generally in other papers as well (with the exception of *The Chicago Tribune*) especially when faced with war or human rights issues, though there criticisms, namely with involvement in Korea and Vietnam. In 1980, the *Christian Science Monitor* made its case for interdependence, “In the latter vein, sometimes interdependence is touted as the successor to independence. And there is every reason for each nation and individual to realize what they can contribute to others and what others can contribute to them.” ⁶

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⁵ “*Interdependence,*” The New York Times, 7 July 1926, (NYT_19260705)
⁶ “*Everybody’s Fourth,*” The Christian Science Monitor, 2 July 1980, (CSM_19800702)
The Chicago Tribune were able to connect July 4th with other values and ideals besides independence, they were also able to make a case for connectedness and interdependence that was incredibly offensive and backwards to the Tribune, especially in the early half of the 20th century.

A Look at the Founding

For all of the newspapers, regardless of political leaning, a review of American revolutionary history was a simple way to bring a point home, or even take up space when needed during the holiday weekend. Most common in editorials was the idea that the Founding Fathers were brilliant in their foresight, skill, and infallibility. This narrative of the Founding Fathers is also most easily linked to the idea of America being great and worth celebrating on the Fourth, and also inherently better than other countries, simply because of the brilliance of the founders. In not acknowledging the faults and mistakes of those who founded America, it is all too easy to generalize their accomplishments and elevate them to a pedestal from which they will not come down. Which narrative these newspapers choose is important, because it does show in a more broad sense their opinion of how far America has come, and from what beginning. The view of the legacy of each founding father is also important in understanding the overarching viewpoint of each paper.

As said in the Washington Post, “Adams and Jefferson are potent guides to the present generation and will be to future generations. Their thoughts, uttered over a century ago, are immortal.” 7 This idealized view of the founding fathers is in sharp contrast to the more humanized and realistic view of the Christian Science Monitor where those who fought were in

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no way the majority voice of the colonies, “It was true of the founding of the nation: The
colonists were a small band taking on the world’s greatest power; and no more than 20 percent of
Americans actually fought for the Declaration.” 8 In the Christian Science Monitor, much of the
history they retell is nuanced and more complicated, often speaking to the constant struggles the
founding fathers dealt with for years in their struggle for independence, which then relates more
broadly to a complicated America that cannot be defined solely through its often elevated status.
The story that the others tell, particularly in more recent years is that of an infallible group of
founders who were never wrong, and in turn, an often superior and infallible America.

A related, and incredibly interesting note to make is that the narrative each paper has
been telling from 1920 onward has also changed dramatically, especially when printing editorials
regarding the history of America. Through all the papers, the opinions of the editorial board were
very clearly argued, and if they used a reference to the founding fathers at all, it was to briefly
muse on their legacy and then to immediately go back to the issue at hand. In the earlier years of
the 20th century, there was little to no editorializing on the individual contribution of the likes of
Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. This shifted dramatically towards the end of the 20th century
and into the 21st where the editorials became both shorter and less substantive across all papers.
These later editorials also became a brief review of American history on a very basic level, with
little to no editorializing on current issues or the direction in which the country is heading.
Largely, this shift is most likely due to the heavy influence that the newspapers and print media
in general had over public opinion and culture at the beginning of and through most of the 20th
century that did not continue towards the end. The content and length of the editorials in all
papers most likely shifted in order to keep up with the changing audience and lesser demand that

the popularity of readily available news on the internet created. This can be seen most clearly in the case of the *Christian Science Monitor*, which switched to entirely online publication in 2008, citing a drop in sales that made it nearly impossible to continue operating. Because of the competition that was very heavily generated later in the 20th century by the internet, many newspapers had to make the switch to softer, faster news in order to even stay afloat. This switch amounts to a lack of the same type of editorializing that was commonplace in the 1920’s and beyond. A concentration on easy to understand and short editorials very much limits the options that each newspaper has.

**Exceptionalism in Print and Practice**

The idea of American Exceptionalism has been present since the revolutionary war. Through declaring independence from Britain, the founders were making a point that this new nation was better than simply remaining a British colony. It was more important and could rise to more challenged and goals than ever expected. This narrative continues to this day, in all types of media and international decisions that imply that the United States is the only nation suited for solving a myriad of problems. Through the entirety of its history, the U.S has very consciously tried to perpetuate the idea that it is superior, especially when being looked towards in times of crisis, like the world wars. Because of this, other countries and the American press have continued to view America as superior and the champions of democracy and freedom. This style of reporting continues the perception that America is better than other countries, or more able to handle any given situation. This idea that America is far superior to other countries was very apparent in the editorials in *The Chicago Tribune*, most surprisingly:

> Because ours is the only great nation in the world so oriented, so organized, and so governed, ours is the greatest and strongest among them. This is why July 4th is the
most important secular anniversary celebrated anywhere in the modern world. It marks the day when the world learned how men should live in society. ⁹

Though it was certainly the most blatant example of American exceptionalism, it was by no means alone in either implying or directly stating that America was better in some respects, or more suited to certain tasks in a global light. For example, in 1950 the Washington Post wrote, “So the United States, as the greatest power on Earth, has been given the role as defender of peace.” ¹⁰ This idea of the United States being the ‘defender of peace and freedom’ also serves to further the idea that America is superior because it heavily implies that no other country would be able to take on that role, even if they desired to.

Even when being taught in schools, it is heavily implied that in any given international conflict, the outcome would have been dramatically different had the United States not gotten involved, sometimes even hinting at the idea of a lost war. When the United States is readily given this role as savior to the global community, it is hard to think of it as anything else, even when other countries also get heavily involved in the affairs of countries. This role has also given other countries the opportunity to hold America at a different standard than they would hold themselves or allies, as outlined by the Washington Post in 1982:

Americans frequently object that the rest of the world seems to hold them to a higher standard than any other country. But, in view of American luck and American history, is that not reasonable? If justice, liberty, and other revolutionary ideas do not flourish here, it is hard to know what other country might be their defender. The Continental Congress held the opinion that being an American was a vocation, with broad responsibilities for the course of history. From time to time Americans get fed up with the idea, and drop it. The purpose of the revolutionary holiday is to provide a gentle reminder that not even Americans can afford to take the revolutionary tradition for granted. ¹¹

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It is an exaggeration to think that no other country would be able to foster revolutionary ideas like justice and liberty. Although it is often painted as such, the United States is not the only free nation in the world who has been able to retain that freedom for an extended period of time. All of the papers, regardless of time or political leaning, do their part in either directly stating or implying that America is better than other nations in some way. The Chicago Tribune looks towards things like patriotism and the success of the revolution to paint America as an incredibly unique and exceptional. Other papers, like the New York Times rely on international examples to heavily imply that America was the only suitable nation to intervene.

More influential than a newspapers perspective on independence and interdependence or even how to view past Independence days is the position that any newspaper takes on the idea of the ‘proper’ place of American on a global scale. The New York Times serves as an interesting contradiction to the blatant acceptance and assertion that the U.S. is superior to other countries in that while it recognizes that it has been given the title of one of the strongest and greatest countries in the world by some world leaders, it uses that place to editorialize what to do with the power given to us by others, rather than that which we impose on others:

“Nor can the day pass confined to glorification of what we are and to anxious studies of what we ought to be here at home. Even the stoutest and most assertive of American nationalists cannot fail today to lift up their eyes and see written on the sky our new destiny to cooperate with the rest of the world. We cannot escape world problems if we would.” 12

This notion of American exceptionalism can very often become harmful quickly, especially when getting involved with other countries, as the U.S. all too often assumes they know how best to handle a situation as they are the ‘defender of peace and freedom.’ Curbing

this cycle will most likely start with the media, though this may prove to be difficult as the ways in which America is implied to be superior is so often subtle, to the point where it may even be unnoticeable.

American exceptionalism is an idea that has been present since the birth of the nation, and one that will most likely continue until its end. In many ways, contemporary media like television and the internet have further inundated today’s discourse surrounding the idea of American exceptionalism, often in subtle ways. Even more so than the internet, the press has proven to be the main factor in the perpetuation of American exceptionalism, as can be seen in the Chicago Tribune calling America the, “greatest and strongest” nation to exist. Whether intentional or not, each papers’ position on topics like independence or interdependence proved to shape their perspective on the country as a whole, as well as the place it should assume on a global scale. In a similar vein, using the founding fathers in editorials on or around the Fourth of July have defined both how each paper views American history, but also the individuals who founded it. This exceptionalism is much more widespread than many would think, simply because there are very few instances where it is blatant, but many where it is more subtle which may contribute to the continued belief of many that America is better than other nations.
The project I researched this semester centered on analyzing shifts in American Exceptionalism (how the United States or America in general sees itself as unique and even superior to other countries because of its ideals and its role in the global community). We were able to do this through collecting editorials written around the 4th of July. More specifically, I read through editorials mentioning Independence Day, or more broadly the 4th of July from July 1st through July 7th for every year from 1920-2015 in four separate papers. Those were The Christian Science Monitor, The Chicago Tribune, The Washington Post and The New York Times. In collecting these editorials, I used both Proquest Historical Newspapers as well as Proquest Newsstand. This was obviously quite a bit of information to go through, so just reading through the editorials took up a majority of the semester, but by April I was looking at patterns through time in specific papers and between papers. Specifically the New York Times called for Americans to accept their role as the defender of “justice, liberty, and other revolutionary ideas” and then went on to say that “no other country could do so as well as the US.” This fairly thoroughly conveys the idea that The US does hold itself to a higher level than other countries, and that those feelings are particularly heightened around holidays like the 4th of July, where we as a nation look back at our history and tend to elevate ourselves to a higher level.

These patterns were really interesting to look at because some of them weren’t very easy to see until you had read through decades of editorials and could see a kind of bigger picture. One of these themes that was really very present in the papers was the idea of America being this “defender of freedom.” Or the one country that was in some ways responsible for ensuring democracy in other countries and promoting peace in general. This title as the defender of
freedom proved to some extent that the US has elevated itself to a very high level, but also that other countries have continued to hold the US at that level as well.

This research has definitely been really interesting, and for ways that I never would have guessed in January or even later in the semester. In the past, research papers or projects have always been fairly simple and easy undertakings, which is one of the reasons why this was so different. Obviously it was much longer than any other research I’ve done, which made me appreciate so much more the effort and dedication it takes to even be able to really scratch the surface in primary sources and materials in general, especially when researching an original topic. I think one of the main lessons I’ve learned from this in general is that research is a process with so many intricacies that could be looked over so easily. Research, especially research like this is something I’ve learned is really finicky and just generally really difficult sometimes, because no matter how much you want the software to find your results, and without very many complications, life is rarely that kind. This was such a big change because I’ve become so used to doing surface level research in high school, where I never was asked to engage with the material I found on a level anywhere closer to what I have done in this research project.

I was also really surprised now that I can look back on everything I’ve found and done that I became so much more invested in this than I thought I would be, which I suppose comes from working on this for so long and finding it more and more interesting as time went on and as patterns were starting to develop within the editorials and between papers. In general, I think that this was definitely a learning experience both because I had never really done anything to this scale before but also because I had to learn how to efficiently budget my time, which definitely went more smoothly in some weeks than others, either because of work in other classes or
because Proquest wasn’t cooperating. Even though it was difficult and came with a definite
learning curve in the beginning, it was gratifying to be able to handle something like this project
by the end of the semester that at the beginning seemed horribly overwhelming.