

This article was downloaded by: [Monash University Library]

On: 18 March 2013, At: 16:48

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Contemporary Security Policy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fcsp20>

American Exceptionalism and President Obama's Call for Abolition of Nuclear Weapons

Andrew Butfoy

Version of record first published: 25 Oct 2012.

To cite this article: Andrew Butfoy (2012): American Exceptionalism and President Obama's Call for Abolition of Nuclear Weapons, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 33:3, 462-486

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2012.727680>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

American Exceptionalism and President Obama's Call for Abolition of Nuclear Weapons

ANDREW BUTFOY

President Obama came to office promising to make abolition of nuclear weapons a central policy goal. Conventional explanations for the arguably poor progress made here (explanations which focus on political and bureaucratic processes) fail to capture an important part of the story. This is that the president comes from a political tradition marked by exceptionalist assumptions. This tradition encompasses a distinctly American attempt to converge idealism and realism; it seeks change, but also constrains aspirations within conservative limits. His conception of exceptionalism is based on a presumption of American moral leadership integrated with a requirement for continued American strategic primacy. As a result, his view of abolition requires global acceptance of American conventional military superiority, reinforcing doubts about the vision's prospects.

Introduction: America and Abolition

In 2008 presidential candidate Barack Obama promised to take the United States into a new era. Many supporters expected his election would renew a sense of national meaning and purpose; they hoped it would have a transformative impact on America's place in the world. His rhetoric implied this impact would be broad, but especially directed at key areas, with Washington leading the international community towards the abolition of nuclear weapons. This was to be a 'central element' of his policy if elected.¹

The quest for abolition framed key presidential speeches during 2009: in Prague; at the United Nations; and in Oslo, where Obama accepted the Nobel Peace Prize.² He was borrowing from two broad strands of reformist opinion and helping to direct them into policy. One strand consisted of idealists and assorted international panels who for decades had been using mostly moral arguments to call for nuclear disarmament. Another current was composed of former American officials with impeccable establishment credentials calling for a change in nuclear weapons policy mostly on national interest grounds.³

Despite the effort to make Obama seem new, followers of American politics found much of his electioneering rhetoric familiar. It reflected the longstanding idealist aspect of American exceptionalism, conveying that with himself in the White House the United States would deliver on the promise of its centuries-old foundation myth as a uniquely virtuous nation and the primary engine of human progress. The man's words were therefore part of a pattern: after all, many politicians have

claimed a vote for them would also be a vote to fulfil the American potential to remake the world into something profoundly better.

So, in one sense, his advocacy of abolition as part of a broader movement to reassert the goodness said to be inherent in the nation was unremarkable. However, this stance on nuclear weapons seemed to be more than simple electioneering rhetoric and a shallow appeal to idealism. For one thing, his position reflected years of periodic contemplation on the matter.⁴ Furthermore, this was a specific commitment to concrete policy in an area in which presidents have direct power as commander-in-chief. Moreover, the signalled shift in policy appeared to reverse longstanding American thinking which had previously leveraged political and strategic advantage from the nation's possession of nuclear weapons.

Now, it is true that the United States had supposedly been committed to working toward nuclear abolition since signing the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968.⁵ Also, earlier presidents, such as Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, had floated the idea of radical arms control.⁶ But the commitment to aim for abolition given in the NPT was never integrated into policy, and was hardly ever taken seriously. Previous presidents did not approach disarmament with the convergence of aspiration, opportunity and expectation associated with Obama.

To illuminate Obama's approach to nuclear weapons this article employs the idea of American exceptionalism. It first outlines the nature of the phenomenon and discusses the president's relationship to it; the article then examines his policy, and connects this to exceptionalism. The analysis shows that although his stance represents a significant shift by raising the salience of abolition as a long-term declaratory goal, in substance it is not as radical as many people either hoped or feared, and is unlikely to deliver in terms of making abolition a driving force of policy. One reason for this is that the president comes from a political tradition which, although inspiring a desire for change, in practice constrains aspirations within comparatively conservative limits. In particular, his conception of exceptionalism is based on a presumption of American moral leadership integrated with a requirement for American strategic primacy (defined here as clear superiority in usable military power). When this is added to the fact that policy must be filtered through political and bureaucratic processes, it is unsurprising that achievements have fallen short of the hopes of many advocates of disarmament. But this is not a simple story of bureaucratic process and realpolitik sabotaging idealism. It is a more complex tale in which putative idealism in its exceptionalist form contains intrinsic limitations regarding the potential for disarmament.

Exceptionalism

American exceptionalism is a set of ideas, deeply rooted in the nation's history, about the nature of the country and its relationship with the external world. Although precisely what exceptionalism means is subject to debate, it can be understood as clustering around the following seven themes. These often overlap, and the prominence of each varies with time; but seen as a fluctuating package they help describe the American world view.⁷

1. *America's unique origins provide it with a superior political culture.* According to this idea, America, unlike other nations, was not born out of monarchical rivalry, feudal hierarchy, ethnicity, or narrow material interests; instead it arose from, and is defined by, principles and ideals, especially a striving for liberty. Innocence and essential goodness is considered integral to the national character. The notion that the American political system is an approximation to perfection which came almost fully formed with independence arguably inhibits understanding of political difference on the world stage. From a standpoint anchored on America's foundational ideal, the never-ending problems apparently inherent in the squabbles of the outside world seem less like rational politics and more like an enormous mess.⁸
2. *American virtue is a constitutive element of the country's foreign policy.* The idealized form of American identity outlined above is often considered key to the country's behaviour overseas. In other words, American foreign policy is seen as being about more than simply the pursuit of narrow national interests and the maximizing of material and strategic returns. The exercise of American power is believed to encompass an impulse to uplift the human condition. So in 1914 President Woodrow Wilson lectured that 'The idea of America is to serve humanity.'⁹ President George H.W. Bush (senior) could say of the 1991 war with Iraq, that 'we can selflessly confront . . . evil for the sake of good in a land . . . far away'.¹⁰ The rest of the world is assumed to see things the same way:

Much good can come from the prudent use of power. And much good can come of this: [the world] now recognizes one sole and preeminent power, the United States of America. And they regard this with no dread. For the world trusts us with this power, and the world is right. They trust us to be fair and restrained. They trust us to be on the side of decency. They trust us to do what's right. . .¹¹

The framing of issues in this manner is said to reflect the nation's values and be crucial to understanding the singular nature of America as a country which partly defines itself in terms of its potential to improve the world.

3. *The United States is an exemplar nation without parallel.* The country is assumed to encapsulate a political philosophy with universal relevance and appeal. This was apparently validated, and certainly reinforced, with American victory in the Cold War. According to President Bush senior:

America, not just the nation but an idea, [is] alive in the minds of people everywhere. As this new world takes shape, America stands at the center of a widening circle of freedom – today, tomorrow, and into the next century. Our nation is the enduring dream of every immigrant who ever set foot on these shores, and the millions still struggling to be free. This nation, this idea called America, was and always will be a new world.¹²

This is connected to what Christopher Thorne called 'notions of the world beyond the Republic as being nascently American'.¹³ It is not a big jump from this to viewing the nation's identity in terms of its positive differences from the inadequacies of the external world. So the idea of America is seen as a benchmark which helps explain

the external world: the gap between America and the rest reveals the external world's stunted development, as well as its potential for better things – if it follows America into the future.

4. *History has a special purpose for the United States, related to a special connection to God in the struggle between good and evil.* Exceptionalist thinking often sees history as having a meaning and direction which converges with American values and interests. According to Ronald Reagan: 'We cannot escape our destiny ... The leadership of the free world was thrust upon us two centuries ago'.¹⁴ This understanding can have a spiritual dimension, with many believing the United States is following God's purpose.¹⁵ Reagan enthusiastically quoted Pope Pius XII's opinion that 'The American people have a great genius for splendid and unselfish actions. Into the hands of America God has placed the destinies of an afflicted mankind.'¹⁶ According to Newt Gingrich, 'our creator [is] the source of our rights, our well-being, and our wisdom' and this helps explain why America is 'the most exceptional nation in history'.¹⁷ From a different spot on the political spectrum, President Jimmy Carter claimed the nation was 'the first society openly to define itself in terms of both spirituality and human liberty. It is that unique self-definition which has given us an exceptional appeal, but it also imposes on us a special obligation to take on ... moral duties'; fortunately, these duties 'when assumed, seem invariably to be in our own best interests'.¹⁸
5. *America's power is a product of its intrinsic goodness.* According to this belief, American power has not resulted simply from shrewd politics or luck. Instead it is a just reflection of, and reward for, America's inner virtue; 'goodness and greatness' are interrelated.¹⁹ Obama has made an associated claim: 'Fidelity to our values is the reason why the United States of America grew from a small string of colonies under the writ of an empire to the strongest nation in the world.'²⁰
6. *America is the 'indispensable nation'.* In 1998 then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, talking about the likelihood of attacking Iraq, said: 'if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future.'²¹ This sentiment reflects more than the claim that history vindicates America, and extends to the assertion that it licenses the nation: pre-presidential Obama believed the United States had become a necessary 'reluctant sheriff';²² while historian Paul Johnson argued it is America's unique capacity to integrate power and idealism which prevents the world falling into a Hobbesian hellhole.²³
7. *Belief in progress is part of the national character.* American rhetoric is frequently marked by optimism; it is said new beginnings in the direction of progress are always possible. This is linked to the belief that humanity is not trapped in an endless cycle of despair and that the world is perfectible. There might be bumps in the road, but history is not intrinsically tragic; problems have solutions, and the future always offers hope of a better world. The past is seen as a series of new beginnings, not baggage holding the country back, and the future is continuing the pattern of ever-present potential. '[T]he American people knows no limits,'

said President Bush senior. 'We are *the* Nation that believes in the future. We are *the* Nation that can shape the future.'²⁴

Exceptionalism is not an unquestioned, static or deterministic blueprint for policy. Instead it describes an inter-related set of notions. The precise interpretation and relative significance of each of these has changed over the years, reflecting domestic and external influences. So exceptionalism can point thinking on national security in different directions. For instance, in the 1930s American virtue was seen as something in need of protecting from the outside world, reinforcing the case for isolationism. This also springs from a sense that the external world presents intractable problems, and a concern that internationalism could encourage a corrupting and draining tendency toward empire. Exceptionalist thinking can also feed neo-isolationism (of the kind President George W. Bush was accused of before September 11), unilateralism (as said to be symbolized by Bush after September 11), or liberal internationalism of the sort associated with Obama. Each approach has been said by its supporters to best represent what America really stands for.

Obama's Exceptionalism

Exceptionalist beliefs encourage Americans to see themselves as part of a grand project laid down in outline long ago but given contemporary form by their current leaders; it can therefore be used to legitimize political programmes or at least locate them in a familiar landscape. In 2008 Obama tried to do this by presenting his manifesto as part of a distinctively American project to improve the human condition.

However, some conservatives claim Obama rejects exceptionalism, implying by this he is somehow 'unAmerican'. They argue he is too ready to submerge American values in a broader, secular cosmopolitan project marked by multilateralism, especially as symbolized by the United Nations, and is too willing for the United States to be seen as just another country. But this criticism often seems more like political scrapping than analysis, sometimes reflecting an electioneering tendency to compete in proclamations of American greatness.²⁵

Although not all Obama's speeches tick every box identified above, and often stress working with other countries within the UN, they also resonate with exceptionalist ideas presented as a creed. There is also a personal connection to exceptionalism. While campaigning for the presidency in 2008 he explicitly located his life story within a narrative of how the union, although stained and imperfect, was capable of being perfected.²⁶ This perfectibility was due to the nation's supposedly unique promise; it was this promise, inherent in the original idea of America but not properly delivered until after long years of civil rights struggle, which produced a transformation in race relations. Using this approach he presented his biography as symbolizing America's singular potential for embodying progress.²⁷ As he put it in the 2012 election campaign: 'my entire career has been a testimony to American exceptionalism';²⁸ although self-serving, the claim also sounded plausible.

On a more operational level, some commentators note a connection between Obama's earlier experience as a community organizer in Chicago, which 'seems to have bred in him a belief in human progress achieved in small but determined steps', and his presidential interest in evolving global institutions.²⁹ In line with this, many of the President's statements can be read within the liberal internationalist, or Wilsonian, strand of exceptionalism.³⁰ Here, national interests and broader notions of human progress are seen as converging and as both requiring the evolution of international law and institutions. Moreover, this evolution is seen as both practically realizable and as an unfolding of historical forces.

Wilsonianism can appear universalist rather than exceptionalist; however, it frequently pivots on American leadership. For Wilson in 1914, America was about 'the elevation of the spirit of the human race. For that is the only distinction that America has.'³¹ Furthermore, the United States is understood to provide an otherwise missing link between principles and action. Or, as then Senator Obama wrote in 2007:

The mission of the United States is to provide global leadership grounded in the understanding that the world shares a common security and a common humanity ...

[We should not] ignore America's great promise and historic purpose in the world. If elected president, I will start renewing that promise and purpose the day I take office.³²

As indicated earlier, the ambitious, perhaps conceited, notion of historic purpose is unremarkable in the context of American self-identity: the nation sees itself uniquely placed to engineer a convergence between leadership, power, moral duty, and the global common good. Again, despite its sweeping nature, in terms of American rhetoric there was an ordinariness in the president's 2009 statement that:

we must make it clear to every man, woman and child around the world who lives under the dark cloud of tyranny that America will speak out on behalf of their human rights, and tend to the light of freedom and justice and opportunity and respect for the dignity of all peoples. *That is who we are.* That is the source, the moral source, of America's authority.³³

However, given the president's record across the defence and foreign policy spectrum,³⁴ it would be wrong to label him a utopian idealist. A better description might be neo-Kantian, in the sense that he is trying to reconcile a realist grasp of how troublesome and intractable the world is with an ethical stance based on idealist notions of the potential for change.³⁵ Kant theorized a direction to history which trended toward an idealized end-point, something which provided a basis for practical hope and moral action. His teleology was arguably not deterministic prediction but more a heuristic method and guide: we ought to act as though progress, while not inevitable in an objective sense, is at least possible.³⁶

There is an overlap here with American exceptionalism's remarkable mix of Enlightenment belief in rational progress and an almost mystical³⁷ sense of the nation's place in the unfolding of world affairs according to some higher plan. In

its quest for right, America sometimes immodestly sees itself as representing destiny, or at least as having destiny on its side.³⁸ In Obama's words, 'The currents of history may ebb and flow, but over time they move – decidedly, decisively – in a single direction. History is on the side of the free – free societies, free governments, free economies, free people.'³⁹ Here, history's progressive meaning partly springs from America as an idea, and Washington is seen as naturally having the lead role in bridging the global 'now' with aspirations for a radically better future. One reason for this is that the potential to construct a better future is believed to reflect Americanness, what 'makes us fix our eye not on what is seen, but what is unseen, that better place around the bend'.⁴⁰

In his Noble Peace Prize speech the president said the task was to 'bend history' in the direction of progress while recognizing 'the imperfections of man and the limits of reason'. He continued: 'But we do not have to think that human nature is perfect for us to still believe that the human condition can be perfected. We do not have to live in an idealized world to still reach for those ideals that will make it a better place.' The key was to have 'fundamental faith in human progress – that must always be the North Star that guides us on our journey', because, 'if we lose that faith – if we dismiss it as silly or naïve; if we divorce it from the decisions that we make on issues of war and peace – then we lose what's best about humanity. We lose our sense of possibility. We lose our moral compass.'⁴¹ In Prague the president had declared 'there are those who hear talk of a world without nuclear weapons and doubt whether it's worth setting a goal that seems impossible to achieve'; he went on to suggest that if such thinking determined events, 'That's where human progress ends'.⁴² A world without the prospect of progress, it is implied by exceptionalist thinking, would be a world in which America had lost its way, had become something else.

So, more than material considerations were said to be at work. As the president put it in 2011, America is '*the* light to the world', and 'what sets us apart must not just be our power – it must also be the purpose behind it'.⁴³ In announcing attacks on Libyan government forces in that country's 2011 civil war, the president said:

To brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and – more profoundly – our responsibilities to our fellow human beings . . . would have been a betrayal of who we are. Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different.⁴⁴

Here, in the Libyan case was right purpose converging with the currents of history and legitimizing the exercise of power. Corresponding with this, there was nothing pacifist about the earlier Nobel Peace Prize speech. International order and human values needed to be protected by a readiness to use military force. Moreover,

the world must remember that it was not simply international institutions – not just treaties and declarations – that brought stability to a post-World War II world. Whatever mistakes we have made, the plain fact is this: The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms.⁴⁵

In Obama's discourse American example and inspiration show the way, while its power defends the possibility of progress by keeping the forces of regression at bay. This was not a perspective acquired simply as a consequence of bearing the responsibilities of high office. As a senator in 2007, the future president had invoked Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy to illustrate his belief that America 'by deed and example, led and lifted the world' and did this not through simple idealism but by also constructing enormous military power and melding it to a practical sense of moral purpose. They used American strength 'to show people everywhere America at its best'.⁴⁶ This period saw Washington engaged in a series of sometimes questionable military interventions and a colossal arms race. The redeeming feature was the big picture; this apparently vindicated what might otherwise look like militarism. So even when American military power was clearly superior to any rival, in 2007 the future president argued America needed to 'revitalize' and 'rebuild' its armed forces for its possible use on 'a global scale' partly because 'We must ... consider using military force in circumstances beyond self-defense in order to provide for the common security that underpins global stability.'⁴⁷

Obama's Nuclear Weapons Policy

Nuclear weapons policy appears to offer a promising canvas for presidential leadership and innovation. The issue is portentous, is open to abstract debate, and the key arguments about deterrence are relatively simple. Moreover, if he chooses to push the point, as commander-in-chief the president can have a dominant say, compared to, for instance, economic policy. Despite legacy issues, entrenched interests and sometimes recalcitrant bureaucratic politics, the president would seem to have significant scope for making his mark in this area.

And Obama did want to make his mark. In the 2009 Prague speech he said:

as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act. We cannot succeed in this endeavor alone, but we can lead it, we can start it ...

So today, I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons ...

the United States will take concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons.⁴⁸

In what was billed as one of these steps, in 2010 the administration released a new Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which stated: 'The long-term goal of U.S. policy is the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.'⁴⁹ Achieving this will require a robust global non-proliferation effort, therefore, 'for the first time, the 2010 NPR places this priority atop the U.S. nuclear agenda'.⁵⁰

To this end Washington's approach to the NPT was revised. The NPT is a deal between the five legitimate nuclear-armed states (those who had tested nuclear weapons before the Treaty opened for signature: China; France; Russia; the United

Kingdom; and the United States) and the rest of its membership. The deal stipulates that states without nuclear arms agree not to acquire them on condition they have access to nuclear technology for peaceful uses, and that the nuclear weapons states pursue disarmament. Previously, the nuclear weapon states overwhelmingly emphasized the non-proliferation side of the equation while down-playing the disarmament side. The administration said it would rebalance the equation, and 'reaffirm through its own actions the grand bargain that underpins the treaty'.⁵¹

However, despite this reaffirmation, the administration's strategic policy looks mostly like an incremental adaptation of what was inherited from President Bush. Some continuity was to be expected given that Bush had already backed off from the more alarming neoconservative prescriptions (suggesting, for instance, an inclination to attack Iran) before leaving office, that he had ordered his own cuts to nuclear force levels, and that his Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, was retained by the new administration. Following the inauguration troops were not rushed out of Iraq, and the United States remained heavily engaged militarily in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Washington continued to project large defence budgets even after the pull-out from Iraq and the expected withdrawal from Afghanistan, with annual 'baseline' spending set to remain over \$500 billion for the foreseeable future.⁵² Even with large cuts on the horizon, America will continue to outspend the combined total for the next several highest military spenders in the world (many of whom are Washington's allies in any case) for a long time,⁵³ and this when the United States is relatively secure.⁵⁴ Especially noteworthy here was the administration's 2010 decision, partly connected to the need to calm domestic concern about its perceived softness on deterrence, to increase spending on nuclear weapons.⁵⁵ This included, to take only one example, an arguably over-engineered Life Extension Program for the B61 nuclear bomb, with some estimates of costs running to about \$10 billion.⁵⁶

Another signifier of limited disarmament progress involved nuclear testing. In 2009 the president had stated:

To achieve a global ban on nuclear testing, my administration will immediately and aggressively pursue U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty [CTBT]. After more than five decades of talks, it is time for the testing of nuclear weapons to finally be banned.⁵⁷

The test ban had been signed by President Bill Clinton in 1996 but rejected by the Senate in 1999. It is a limited but also key stepping stone in the direction of abolition. Yet, at the time of writing, it remains unratified, with administration officials saying the time has not been 'ripe' for the political challenge involved.⁵⁸ This is partly due to the energy sucked up by the ratification fight for the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia, and a range of unrelated political distractions such as health care.

On the other hand, the New START agreement with Moscow was a much-publicized example of part of the administration's agenda being delivered. This deal set reductions in the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads from those agreed to by the previous administration – from 2,200 to 1,550 each by 2018. This was to be 'a concrete step on the path to nuclear disarmament'.⁵⁹ However, the agreement

was not revolutionary, and did not radically reshape America's nuclear arsenal. Instead, it continued a trend established in the 1980s to reduce wildly excessive Cold War numbers in a series of incremental, essentially conservative, steps.⁶⁰ With nuclear cuts Obama allowed his rhetoric to run away into spin, as in his claim, made in Prague, that under his leadership America would now 'begin' to reduce nuclear force levels,⁶¹ when the four previous presidents had each pruned the arsenal resulting in several thousand fewer warheads.⁶² Moreover, thousands of 'non-strategic' and 'non-deployed' Russian and American nuclear warheads remained outside the reach of the treaty.⁶³

Furthermore, despite being much heralded, the previously mentioned 2010 NPR fell short of sharply redirecting American strategy, making little change to when and how the United States would use the bomb, although the reduced salience attached to nuclear threats was welcomed as a move away from the alarming tone of some of the previous administration's presentation of policy. The NPR did say nuclear weapons would have a more restrictive role than previously, insofar as the bomb would not be used to retaliate to a terrorist-like attack with chemical weapons, but this was unlikely any way. Some analysts were too quick to welcome overstated change in American strategic thinking. One example was the claim that: 'The United States no longer intends to use nuclear weapons whenever it is convenient, but only reserves the right to decide to do so in extraordinary circumstances.'⁶⁴ But the United States has never been interested in using nuclear weapons simply because it was convenient; and any use of nuclear weapons by Bush junior or any other president would have been in extraordinary circumstances.

A particular point of concern to critics was the administration's retention of the longstanding option for nuclear first-use. The option fits uneasily with the aim of a world free of nuclear weapons. This is because genuine movement towards abolition would sooner or later require agreement that in the transition the role of nuclear weapons should be defined as narrowly as possible, restricted to only the deterrence of nuclear attack. Indeed, this idea has been at the heart of efforts by large parts of the NPT membership, in successive NPT review conferences, to rein in nuclear doctrines. One focus here was on restrictive 'Negative Security Assurances' (NSAs). Most parties to the NPT want NSAs in which the nuclear weapon club explicitly promise not to target non-nuclear weapon states. But for decades the United States resisted such calls; it preferred to use 'calculated ambiguity' as a way of leveraging the usefulness of implicit nuclear threats against, for example, non-nuclear-armed rogue states. This stance told the world that Washington considered nuclear weapons useful beyond deterring nuclear war and too valuable to give up, which is unhelpful in a non-proliferation context.⁶⁵

The closest the NPR came to meeting calls for restricting nuclear doctrine, apart from withdrawing previously implied threats to use nuclear weapons to retaliate against chemical attack, was to state that: 'The United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty... and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations' (although a similar point had previously been endorsed by Washington in 1997–1998).⁶⁶ However, by saying who it will not attack, the

United States leaves plenty of scope for speculation about who it might attack. For instance, the NPR formulation leaves unchanged the issue of possible first-use against nuclear-armed China or NPT-renegade Iran. Indeed, in 2010 Defense Secretary Gates pointedly noted that the Review allowed for the option of a nuclear attack on Iran,⁶⁷ which although behaving recklessly toward the NPT had no nuclear weapons.

Reformers within the administration were reportedly unable to get conservative blockers within the bureaucracy to agree that the NPR should state that deterring others from using nuclear weapons was to be the 'sole' – rather than 'primary' (which later became 'fundamental') – role of American nuclear weapons.⁶⁸ The words primary and fundamental were generally accepted as code for meaning there were additional reasons for having the bomb beyond deterring nuclear attack, such as the aforementioned threats of first-use. Rejecting the word 'sole' suggested to sceptics that not much was changing. After all, deterring a nuclear attack has been the primary or fundamental role of American nuclear forces for decades. In short, the Review's explicit rejection of deterrence of nuclear attack as the sole purpose of American nuclear weapons appeared to leave nuclear strategy more-or-less where Obama found it.⁶⁹

So it looks like Washington resists a no-first-use policy because it continues to believe American nuclear weapons do more than deter nuclear attack. The weapons are also considered to have a role in underlining American primacy in the management of world order. In particular, it has been assumed the first-use option has the following functions: keeping troublesome states in line; making it easier to use American conventional forces in dangerous regions; reassuring allies like Japan; and enhancing Washington's leadership of alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.⁷⁰

According to the NPR, the only way the broader role given to nuclear weapons can eventually be narrowed to only deterrence of nuclear war will be to amplify American conventional superiority.⁷¹ And since the Review notes that a factor allowing 'significantly lower nuclear force levels and ... reduced reliance on nuclear weapons', has been 'the growth of unrivaled U.S. conventional military capabilities', one might wonder what would happen to the abolitionist agenda if relative American conventional military power diminishes.⁷² This is not explicitly addressed in the Review, although in terms of its internal logic the prognosis for abolition would be poor, probably terminal. One analyst has read between the lines of the NPR and interpreted it to mean that the role of American nuclear weapons on the world stage might *expand* – because of China's rise, nuclear proliferation, an increase in the number of states covered by America's security umbrella, and the difficulty Washington will face in increasing (or even maintaining) its edge in conventional forces.⁷³

Even with current American conventional superiority, the NPR recognizes that the practical prospects for progress on nuclear arms control are limited and implies that for a generation at least only modest incremental steps can be expected. Realistically there is not much mid-term hope of going beyond the following: stabilizing the NPT; implementing New START; ratification of the CTBT; and a deal on a long proposed Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty. Achieving all this would be valuable and

significant, but hardly breaks new ground. Thus, the NPR acknowledges that the bomb is set to stay on the international landscape in any politically plausible timetable, declaring a need to maintain the nation's nuclear weapons infrastructure for 'the next several decades or more'.⁷⁴

In short, without clear signs of more significant and innovative follow-up action, neither the NPR nor New START can be convincingly seen as representing a sharp break from the past or an especially substantive step towards disarmament.⁷⁵

Explaining Obama's Nuclear Weapons Policy

This article proposes that exceptionalist ideas have contributed to Obama's nuclear weapons policy. However, this contribution is only part of the story, so it is important to be clear about what is *not* being argued here. Firstly, exceptionalism does not explain the abolitionist movement in the wider world. One does not have to endorse, or be inspired by, America's singular role to advocate abolition. After all, many foreigners, including some critical of America's place in the world, support abolition for a range of unrelated practical and moral reasons. Secondly, even when bringing the focus back to American policy, exceptionalism still falls short of providing a full explanation.

A comprehensive account will have to await the passage of time; after all, at the time of writing the Obama administration is a work in progress.⁷⁶ A complete explanation would also have to cast the net wider than reflections on aspects of national culture. Among other things, it would require access to confidential notes and classified documents, such as the 'Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy', which provide a bridge between political guidance of the sort given in the NPR and the detailed war plans developed by the military.⁷⁷ Directly related to this, a comprehensive explanation would bring in a detailed analysis of bureaucratic politics. Joanna Spear has shown how this played out in the development of the NPR. In particular, she has mapped the interplay between 'facilitators' and 'blockers' of the abolition vision, as well as the role of the 'neutrals'. She argues that bureaucratic politics explain why the substance of administration policy has fallen so short of the disarmament expectations raised by the president's rhetoric.⁷⁸

Realist and Related Perspectives

Overlapping with bureaucratic factors, there is also a need to consider 'realpolitik', or what realists see as the shaping of policy according to pragmatic factors dominated by relatively narrow considerations of national interests. They see these interests as primary, with concerns about ethics, the wellbeing of the international community, and abstract notions of American identity and purpose being secondary. Indeed, a realist explanation of American nuclear weapons policy can be made without any reference to exceptionalism, which realists can read as essentially window dressing for underlying realpolitik.

There are two main lines of argument available to realists here. The first is that American operational policy remains anchored to deterrence. As the president has said: 'Make no mistake: As long as these weapons exist, the United States will

maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies.⁷⁹ In other words, despite what some critics implied, the administration was not about to sacrifice deterrence because it was 'fixing on zero as the urgent issue before us'.⁸⁰

Connected to this attachment to deterrence, the primary device employed to produce reductions in nuclear force levels has been bilateral arms control with Moscow in the form of New START. Given that Russia and the United States together account for more than 90 per cent of the world's nuclear warheads, it is unsurprising the NPR noted a continuing need to manage strategic stability with Russia.⁸¹ On the other hand, as David Mutimer has argued, this can seem a remarkably conservative device to use if the aim is to move beyond a world with nuclear weapons.⁸² To a significant degree New START continued a pattern set in the 1970s, a pattern which once helped define the Cold War. From then to now (and probably for some time to come), this form of bilateral arms control has had the principal objective of enhancing strategic stability, not producing disarmament. Strategic stability has thus far been seen as resting on three pillars: (a) claims of the sobering, security-producing effect of perceptions of mutual vulnerability to destruction; (b) a related rough bipolar parity in the nuclear strategic balance; and (c) keeping in check any impulse to escape deterrence by open-ended disarmament that could 'destabilize' relations between states. This inherited form of arms control is about the regulation and management of nuclear risk, it is not a drive to eliminate it. As Mutimer notes: 'Cold War arms control is a practice designed to make the world safe for mutual nuclear deterrence: a means of seeking security in a world *with* nuclear weapons.'⁸³ New START can be viewed as the latest iteration of an essentially old paradigm.

A second line of realist argument is that an American call for eventual abolition in the distant future is strategically cost-free and serves American national interests. There are so many excess nuclear warheads that Washington can make cuts ostensibly for the purpose of incremental disarmament while maintaining the world's most effective nuclear arsenal for many years.⁸⁴ At some stage along this path Washington may decide to choose between either going to abolition or tacking to a more conservative form of arms control perpetuating nuclear deterrence at reduced force levels. However, because of the amount of overkill in the system this decision need not be made for a generation or more. Secure on a strategic foundation any realist would be proud of, Obama can claim the moral and progressive high ground knowing it will be up to a successor to deliver (or not) on his more elevated promises.

Furthermore, because the United States has superiority in conventional military power, and since the biggest threat to this superiority is nuclear proliferation, it makes strategic sense for Washington to de-emphasize nuclear weapons. Some prominent national security establishment realists – most notably Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, Sam Nunn, and William Perry, as well as some former senior American nuclear commanders – can see good national interest grounds for going down this road.⁸⁵ The constituency for arms control is even broader if it reinforces global non-proliferation efforts without requiring American disarmament in any tangible timeframe. Indeed, Washington looks more interested in using the rhetoric of

abolition as a means of strengthening non-proliferation in multilateral fora, such as review conferences of the NPT, than as a way of radically reshaping the international security framework or Pentagon planning.

Moreover, in the administration's view there is a key condition to meet before taking radical steps to abolition, one that has a clear realist ring to it: the rest of the world must accept the generally benign and necessary nature of American power. For, as signalled in the NPR and noted above, abolition would only be acceptable if American conventional military dominance is further entrenched. In other words, a world free from nuclear weapons that was acceptable to Washington would have to be a particular type of world. It would not be based on a traditional balance of power, nor would it be founded on an acceptance of moral equivalence between all states. Instead it would be characterized by near universal endorsement of American primacy. One could view this as a form of supercharged realism (although this ought not be pushed too far as it lacks a sense of strategic balancing, and for Obama the virtue of American primacy apparently lies not simply in the national interest but also in a view that it serves universal human interests).

This can be connected to the idea, arguably embraced as American grand strategy, of the liberal democratic peace.⁸⁶ From here the war problem is seen as one affecting relations within the non-democratic world, and between democracies and non-democracies – not between democracies. Muscular liberalism suggests that for nuclear abolition to ever happen, it should follow the establishment of a general and perpetual peace of the sort that only a global transformation to liberal democracy can provide. Abolition would then cap the final ascendancy of liberal democracy. No other world would be safe for disarmament. In the meantime, Washington retains both a deterrent against nuclear attack and a first-use option, suggesting the possibility of first-use remains vital to national security while threats to liberal order remain.

Realists would have little problem explaining most of the conditionality of Obama's vision. This conditionality is easy to interpret in terms of either narrow national interests or the conflation of these interests with naïve and muddled notions of a universal common good. Realists are unsurprised at efforts to bend international norms around national preferences in the name of an erroneously presumed, or shrewdly asserted, underlying harmony of interests.⁸⁷

There is another factor to consider here which realists can readily recognize. George W. Bush's exceptionalism manifested itself between 2001 and 2003 in a period of self-evident American unipolarity; by the time President Obama was steering the exceptionalist ship much of the talk was of the emergence of multipolarity. Bush (at least until the war in Iraq went sour) seemed in a better position to employ American hard power, while Obama had to look to a time when Washington would not have as much strategic and political room to move. And if American power was going to be more constrained by circumstances beyond Washington's control, it made sense to apply constraints universally through, for example, arms control. This was partly about making a virtue out of perceived strategic necessity.

The potential reach of realist-like interpretation is therefore considerable. On the one hand, realists can argue that the dominance of national interest considerations in a

self-help world makes disarmament utopian. On the other hand, in the unlikely event abolition does gain radically more momentum in Washington, critically minded theorists would probably argue that this demonstrated how the language of progressive disarmament can be co-opted by Washington for self-serving ends. For example, the radical marginalizing of nuclear weapons as a threat to civilization would, if it was pursued, not occur in a strategic vacuum. It would probably occur while Washington simultaneously enhanced its more humane and more legitimate conventional forces, especially its 'smart', or precision guided munitions. Indeed, nuclear disarmament might underline the acceptability and centrality of American conventional forces; from here it would only be a short hop to saying nuclear abolition could assist in sustaining the capabilities for relatively unproblematized conventional intervention. (It is worth noting here that the muted response to Washington's expanded interest in drone warfare is concurrent with the sense that Obama is the main focus of nuclear abolitionist hopes.) In short, elastic realist-themed arguments can be stretched to cover a wide range of contingencies: they could potentially be used to explain both why abolition probably cannot happen and, if it did, the national interest reasons for such abolition.

The Limits of Realist Interpretations and the Place of Exceptionalism

Although there appears to be a fit between Obama's strategic policy and a realist reading of politics, it seems simplistic to leave the explanation there, for two reasons. First, although not be examined here, there are highly charged conservative criticisms that the president is behaving *contrary* to the national interest⁸⁸ which do not comfortably fit with realist explanations. Second, given the embedded nature of exceptionalist assumptions in the United States, it would be remarkable if they never impacted on policy. This seems especially pertinent in the case of a president who has made such high claims about the unique role and moral purpose of the United States, and about whom it has been said, 'if you want to know what President Obama thinks, read his speeches'.⁸⁹

Just how exceptionalist thinking influences Washington varies according to the ebb and flow of domestic and international politics. For example, during George W. Bush's presidency, exceptionalism revealed itself in a righteous refusal to be tied down by multilateral constraints like the nuclear test ban and a combative rejection of calls for tighter restrictions on American nuclear targeting options. From where the Bush administration sat American virtue meant it could be trusted to stand above other nations not just as an exemplar but also as an enforcer. Further, it was argued that the nation's moral purpose in confronting the intrinsic evil of rogue states and terrorism meant its power needed to be kept unconstrained and available for broad application to protect not only the United States but civilization itself. By 2003 the moral and political stakes seemed too high to allow America's place in history to be handcuffed to such supposedly flawed cosmopolitan experiments as the United Nations.

Then, under Obama, the presentation of American virtue, purpose, and power shifted to emphasize the role of example and a more far-reaching, albeit long-term, idealist objective. So, while President Bush's 2002 Nuclear Posture Review was

seen as an ominous warning to the wider world,⁹⁰ Obama's NPR was intended more as a reassuring signal to the global community (although the degree this signalling has been effective is another matter⁹¹). With Obama American exceptionalism is less something to be protected from or imposed on the world than it is to be used to express and channel hope. Exceptionalism claims that enlightened leadership can advance history as an uplifting story of human progress. Nuclear weapons, in the form of perpetual deterrence based on the potential for mass slaughter and human regression, had previously seemed outside of this story. Obama now tried to make them part of the progressive narrative via an abolitionist project.

Moreover, for all the bureaucratic wrangling that has accompanied detailed policy development, the president is not only the commander-in-chief but also the 'strategist-in-chief'.⁹² On a broader front, it is said he has 'put a huge burden on himself for the conceptualization [and] articulation' of foreign policy;⁹³ and on nuclear matters, it is reported that:

The Prague speech was President Obama's clear articulation of his . . . agenda. It was composed in the White House with minimal involvement from the wider bureaucracy and is therefore largely unsullied by bureaucratic politics.⁹⁴

The difference between the relatively pristine vision of the Prague speech and the more muddled picture that emerges from policy can be partly explained by bureaucratic politics.⁹⁵ But there is more to the difference between an unsullied abolitionist vision on the one hand and modest policy on the other hand, than that. Obama's world view itself puts a constraint on the vision. Perhaps he is unsettled by the relatively wider role given to American nuclear forces than simply deterring nuclear attack, and he likely sees the contradiction between this wider role and the abolitionist vision. But he is not so disturbed by it that he has ordered its elimination. At the end of the day, he is the head of the executive branch of government, and in that sense, as Brad Roberts, his Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Missile Defense, put it:

These are the president's weapons . . . And the president . . . was not persuaded that the conditions exist today to enable us to safely say that the only purpose of our nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack.⁹⁶

As one might expect, concerns about the practical management of world order trumped any urge there may have been to accelerate the long-range and abstract abolitionist vision.

But this is not quite the same as saying realism trumped idealism. For the president nuclear policy appears not to be a simple 'either/or' choice between the two, and he seems able to combine aspects of the both. In 2008–2009 Obama presented a relatively clear picture of what he wanted to achieve in the area of arms control, which was to put the world on track to the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons. However, he knew there was no chance of getting to the point of abolition during his tenure, which meant there was a requirement for policy which was both prudent in its own terms and could be a potential stepping stone to the ultimate objective. This included New START, maintaining pressure on Iran and North Korea, and

advocacy of the nuclear test ban. That these measures can be rationalized in realist or national interest terms does not mean they therefore conflict with the bigger picture. Perhaps it is just that: ‘Along the way, Obama the candidate with a vision became Obama the president with a pragmatic approach to implementing it.’⁹⁷ Pragmatism and interests are not necessarily the enemy of idealism, they could be facilitators – it depends on the bigger framework. When in 2006 the future president reflected on ‘the work of remaking’ the world, he did so assuming convergence between idealism and American interests, implying that the strings of this convergence could be pulled together by American identity and moral purpose.⁹⁸

Here, it is worth stepping back to the Nobel Speech. Quoting Martin Luther King, the president declared,

I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the ‘isness’ of man’s present condition makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal ‘oughtness’ that forever confronts him.⁹⁹

In bridging ‘isness’ and ‘oughtness’ Obama saw complementarities between a short-to-medium-term realist-like operational policy and a long-term declaratory policy defined in terms of idealist sounding goals. The realist element made it easier to present his stance as grounded and so less likely to frighten away domestic support; while the idealist element provided a sense of meaning and direction to his operational policy which went beyond the here and now. It was presumably hoped by the administration that awkward but inescapable political and strategic considerations had been successfully worked into a bigger narrative which maintained the integrity of the president’s abolitionist vision.

Constraints on the Abolitionist Agenda

However, Obama’s promise to make abolition a central element of American policy bogged down due to a combination of domestic and external factors. Domestically there has been vehement opposition from conservatives which, when combined with constitutional checks, such as the need for two-thirds Senate backing for treaty ratification, is a major constraint. Some congressmen believe abolition ‘is a misguided and dangerous idea’; and while the administration argued New START was a stepping stone toward the goal, conservative senators were quick to note that in ratifying the treaty, ‘The U.S. Senate did not consent to a goal of disarmament.’¹⁰⁰

The president also had to face distractions in pursuing his arms control and disarmament agenda. These included: the intrusion of more immediately important issues, especially the financial crisis, but also healthcare, insurgency in Afghanistan, and revolution in Libya and beyond; and there was a difficult, perhaps ultimately intractable, international disarmament climate.

Nevertheless, the president attempted to make America’s policy on nuclear weapons righteous and noble. In this he naturally enough referenced the idealist strand in the country’s exceptionalist tradition. If only the rest of the world would accept the essential decency of American power and ambitions, the president seemed to think, we would be halfway to abolition. But it would always be

awkward reconciling Washington's continuing attachment to its nuclear weapons with its calls for the rest of the world to gather around and accept the dangerous uselessness of the bomb. He might believe Washington's stance on nuclear weapons is now benign, but this does not itself bring abolition much closer. Instead the belief inadvertently highlights an underlying international political obstacle to progress.

Washington carries too much historical baggage for American idealist rhetoric to be taken at face value by the wider world. This rhetoric has often been viewed as arrogant self-righteousness, even outrageous hypocrisy, and as cover for imposing a type of world order configured around American national interests. However, that much of the world does not accept American power as unconditionally and intrinsically virtuous is not always seen by Washington as cause for reflection, but as showing that some foreigners are on the wrong side of history. From an American viewpoint until these foreigners realize this error, and change their stance accordingly, there is little scope for taking decisive steps towards abolition. Indeed, unless more foreigners change their position and endorse American primacy, and until international relations becomes reliably free from anti-liberal pathologies (of the sort once manifested by Soviet Communism, now symbolized by Islamist extremism and Chinese authoritarianism), it would probably be seen by Americans as positively dangerous for the United States to move too far beyond rhetorical appeals for abolition.

Advocates of abolition generally argue the cause is both realistic and urgent. However, the reason for urgency – growing nuclear danger – casts doubt on the realism or wisdom of abandoning deterrence. Never mind abolition, blockers will say, we are struggling, often unsuccessfully, to curb proliferation dangers presented by the likes of Iran and North Korea. While abolitionists claim a logical link between the example set by moving to zero nuclear weapons and enhancing non-proliferation, there is a contrary political logic: deterring new and emerging nuclear dangers will probably take priority over disarmament. This means the most recalcitrant players on the world stage have a *de facto* veto on the prospects for abolition. Related to this, and despite their general rhetoric in favour of eventual disarmament, in practice most nuclear weapon states seem dismissive of the idea of abolition as a programme of action, and most continue (like the United States) to modernize their arsenals.¹⁰¹

At the end of the 2010 NPR there is a sobering acknowledgement that the 'conditions that would ultimately permit the United States and others to give up their nuclear weapons without risking greater international instability and insecurity are very demanding'. The review continues:

Among those are the resolution of regional disputes that can motivate rival states to acquire and maintain nuclear weapons, success in halting the proliferation of nuclear weapons, much greater transparency into the programs and capabilities of key countries of concern, verification methods and technologies capable of detecting violations of disarmament obligations, and enforcement measures strong and credible enough to deter such violations.¹⁰²

This list of conditions is reasonable but also suggests abolition will have to wait for a revolution in international affairs. In the meantime there is a strong chance that

nuclear deterrence could become further entrenched in American policy. Washington's stance might inadvertently reinforce this by producing a more measured and less reckless nuclear posture based on low force levels. Such a posture might be very difficult to dislodge. Why, in an uncertain world, get rid of a smaller and safer deterrent?

So the arms control agenda will likely continue to be limited by often uncooperative domestic and international factors. There is relatively little evidence for the alternative notion, encouraged by aspirational abolitionist rhetoric, that disarmament ideals will drive politics.¹⁰³

Conclusion

Exceptionalism does not provide a comprehensive explanation or predictive model of how American policy is made, and is not useful as an explanation of the global abolitionist movement. Even so, it sheds light on Obama's stance on nuclear disarmament. For example, his election campaign encompassed both riding, and breathing new life into, America's sense of its unique qualities and place in history. Declaring American leadership in efforts to abolish nuclear weapons was part of this picture, supposedly moving Washington away from viewing the bomb as a permanent foundation for national security and world order. Once seen as protecting the American project during the Cold War, nuclear weapons were to be considered alien to the long-term viability of the project, and leading the abolitionist cause would reset the relationship between America's role in the world and the bomb.

However, although the tone of nuclear weapons policy shifted, by the end of the president's first term substantive changes had been more modest than some hoped for. Force levels had been cut, the range of circumstances said to require nuclear attack was narrowed, and the White House no longer blocked the test ban. But this was partly balanced out by underlying elements of continuity. Washington retained its self-declared right to use nuclear weapons first. In addition, the nuclear arsenal remained bigger than plausible requirements.¹⁰⁴ Even when fully implemented New START will reportedly permit the United States more weapons than were required under the Bush administration's much-criticized nuclear review.¹⁰⁵ And maintenance of strategic primacy generally remained the *sine qua non* of American arms control policy and thinking about world order (indeed, the NPR can be read as advocating a conventional military build-up).¹⁰⁶

So Obama's rhetoric raised expectations in the arms control community that largely remained unmet. Inflated hopes – for radical steps leading to abolition – were unrealistic, reaching beyond what he actually promised. After all, he made it clear his objective was to set the world in the *direction* of abolition, while noting this was an aspiration could only be achieved in the distant future.

This leads to a consideration of the relationship between idealism and realism in Washington's abolitionist policy. One can select evidence to portray the president as a realist who dashed the hopes of his idealist supporters, or as a naïve idealist trapped by political and bureaucratic constraints. But perhaps a better way of understanding the issue is that the abolitionist agenda, understood as an incremental and conditional

programme of action, was seen by the president as a point of convergence between idealism and realism. This sense of convergence was reinforced by exceptionalist thinking which combined idealist elements, including moral imperatives, with a sense that American power is righteous. The president's position reflected a world view given direction by idealist leanings but channelled in a realist-like manner.

This channelling can be viewed as imposed by the American political system and defence community which promote the retention of American military superiority, and declarations of fidelity to the worthiness of this superiority, as a precondition for strategic policy development and election to high office. However, although the political process and defence community advocate and fortify the case for primacy, and shape how it is to be operationalized, an additional layer of explanation is called for.¹⁰⁷ The channelling of what looked like utopian idealism into a relatively conservative form was also a consequence of something else. This is the president's apparent internalization of the dual exceptionalist assumption that America is the key mover and guardian of human progress.

In short, guardianship provided a rationale for primacy which was not simply forced on the president but was intrinsic to his declarations of American leadership. More than this, global acceptance of the legitimacy of this primacy seemed an implicit precondition for abolition. Furthermore, this is likely to remain the case for any future president (assuming they are even interested in abolition as a serious proposition). As far as Washington is concerned, unless this legitimacy is granted by foreigners there is limited room for nuclear disarmament, although the case for incremental stability-oriented arms control would remain strong.

An obvious snag here is that while much of the world accepts American primacy as having merit, it seems unlikely the international community as a whole will endorse a privileged place for enhanced conventional military superiority. This discordance between American perspectives and international politics is a factor which limits the prospects for operationalizing Washington's abolitionist vision. Thus, even in the supposedly idealist form associated with Obama, American exceptionalism has more conservative implications for nuclear policy, and more expansive ramifications for American conventional military planning, than many advocates of disarmament appreciated or would like.

NOTES

1. 'Obama says time to rid world of nuclear weapons', *CNN*, 16 July 2008.
2. Barack Obama, *Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square, Prague, Czech Republic* (Prague: White House, 5 April 2009); 'President Obama Addresses the UN General Assembly', *The Washington Post*, 23 September 2009, p. 5; Barak Obama, *Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize* (Oslo: The White House, 10 December 2009).
3. For an overview of proposals for nuclear disarmament, see Vasileios Savvidis and Jessica Seiler, *Nuclear Disarmament Proposals from 1995 to 2009: A Comparative Chart* (Monterey, CA: Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 2009). See also: *Eliminating Nuclear Threats: A Practical Agenda for Global Policy Makers*, (International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, 2009); George Perkovich and James Acton, *Abolishing Nuclear Weapons*, Adelphi Paper 396, 2008; George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn, 'A World Free of Nuclear Weapons', *Wall Street Journal*, 4 January 2007; *Report of the Canberra Commission on*

- the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons* (Canberra: Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, 1996); *Weapons of Terror: Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Arms* (Stockholm: International Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, 2006).
4. See William Broad and David Sanger, 'Obama's Youth Shaped his Nuclear-Free Vision', *The New York Times*, 4 July 2009.
 5. See Article 6 of the treaty, *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, (more commonly known as the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty), (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 1970).
 6. James Goodby, *At the Borderline of Armageddon: How American Presidents Managed the Atom Bomb* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).
 7. This section draws on a number of sources. For a sample of the literature dealing with exceptionalism, see: Anthony Burke, 'Freedom's Freedom: American Enlightenment and Permanent War', *Social Identities*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (July 2005), pp. 315–43; Jason Edwards and David Weiss (eds), *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays* (London: McFarland, 2011); Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Foreign Policy from its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage, 2007); Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), especially pp. 17–56; Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Paul McCartney, 'American Nationalism and US Foreign Policy from September 11 to the Iraq War', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 119, No. 3 (November 2004), pp. 399–423; John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Why America is Different* (London: Penguin, 2004); Jonathan Monten, 'The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism and Democracy Promotion in US Strategy', *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Spring 2005), pp. 112–56; Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1952, republished 2008); Donald Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Idea that is America: Keeping Faith with Our Values in a Dangerous World* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).
 8. For a deeper analysis along these lines, see Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955).
 9. President Woodrow Wilson, *Annapolis Commencement Address*, 5 June 1914, the American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara.
 10. George Bush, *Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union*, 29 January 1991.
 11. George Bush, *Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union*, 28 January 1992.
 12. George Bush, *Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union*, 31 January 1990.
 13. Christopher Thorne, 'American Political Culture and the End of the Cold War', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (1992), p. 318.
 14. Ronald Reagan, 'We Will be a City Upon a Hill', Speech at Conservative Political Action Conference, 25 January 1974, available at http://reagan2020.us/speeches/City_Upon_A_Hill.asp (accessed 22 August 2012).
 15. According to the Public Religion Research Institute: 'A majority (58%) of Americans believe God has granted America a special role in human history,' See "Findings from the 2010 Post-Election American Values Survey" (Washington, DC: Public Religion Institute, 17 November 2010). For a recent discussion of the nexus between religion and politics in America, see David Campbell and Robert Putnam, 'God and Caesar in America: Why Mixing Religion and Politics is Bad for Both', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (March/April 2012), pp. 34–43.
 16. Reagan, "We Will be a City Upon a Hill" (note 14).
 17. Newt Gingrich, *Rediscovering God in America: Reflections on the Role of Faith in Our Nation's History* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 136–7.
 18. Jimmy Carter, *Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1977, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=6575> (accessed 22 August 2012). For Mormons the link between God and the United States is especially concrete as they believe Jesus was active in America following his resurrection. See Brett Lunceford, 'One Nation under God: Mormon Theology and the American Continent', in Jason Edwards and David Weiss (eds), *The Rhetoric of American*

- Exceptionalism: Critical Essays* (London: McFarland & Company, 2011), pp. 48–62. The Church of Jesus Christ Of Latter-Day Saints, The Book of Mormon, <http://mormon.org/book-of-mormon>.
19. The term is from Thorne, 'American Political Culture and the End of the Cold War' (note 13), p.311.
 20. Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President on National Security*, (Washington, DC: The White House, 21 May 2009).
 21. Madeleine Albright, interview on 'The Today Show', NBC, 19 February 1998.
 22. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown, 2006), p. 306. See also Richard Haas, *The Reluctant Sheriff: The United States After the Cold War* (New York: Council of Foreign Relations Press, 1997).
 23. Paul Johnson, 'American Idealism and Realpolitik', *Forbes Magazine*, 12 March 2007.
 24. George W. Bush, *Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union* (Washington, DC: The White House, 29 January 1991), emphasis added.
 25. For the controversy over whether or not Obama believes in exceptionalism, see: Douglas Feith and Seth Cropsey, 'The Obama Doctrine Defined', *Commentary*, July 2011; John Gans, 'America 2012: Duelling Exceptionalisms', *Survival*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (June–July 2011), pp. 159–68; Newt Gingrich, *To Save America: Stopping Obama's Secular-Socialist Machine* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2011); Newt Gingrich, *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2011); Karen Tumulty, 'American Exceptionalism: An Old Idea and a New Political Battle', *The Washington Post*, 29 November 2010; Richard Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru, 'An Exceptional Debate: The Obama Administration's Assault on American Identity', *National Review*, 8 March 2010; Robert Schlesinger, 'Obama has Mentioned "American Exceptionalism" More than Bush', *US News and World Report*, 31 January 2011; Robert Singh, *Barack Obama's Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).
 26. 'Barack Obama's Speech on Race', *The New York Times*, 18 March 2008.
 27. David Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (London: Picador, 2010); Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Random House, Broadway, 2004).
 28. Devin Dwyer, 'Obama Rebuffs Romney on American Exceptionalism', *ABC News*, 2 April 2012. Also, President Obama's earlier comment on the topic in *Remarks by the President on National Security* (Washington, DC: The White House, 21 May 2009).
 29. Martin Indyk, Kenneth Lieberthal, and Michael O'Hanlon, *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2012), p. 11.
 30. Although exactly what Wilsonianism adds up to is subject to debate. See John Ikenberry *et al.*, *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
 31. Wilson, *Annapolis Commencement Address* (note 9).
 32. Barack Obama, 'Renewing American Leadership', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (July/August 2007), p. 4.
 33. Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, United States Military Academy at West Point (Washington, DC: The White House, 1 December 2009), emphasis added.
 34. See, for example: Joe Becker and Scott Shane, 'Secret Kill List Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will', *The New York Times*, 29 May 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all (accessed 22 August 2012); David Bromwich, 'Obama: His Words and His Deeds' *The New York Review of Books*, 14 July 2011; Ryan Lizza, 'The Consequentialist', *The New Yorker*, 2 May 2011; Mark Manyin *et al.*, *Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's Rebalancing Toward Asia*, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 2012).
 35. For this interpretation of Kant, see W.B. Gallie, *Philosophers of Peace and War: Kant, Clausewitz, Marx, Engels and Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1978), especially p. 36.
 36. Pauline Kleingeld, 'Editor's Introduction', in Pauline Kleingeld (ed.), *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. xv–xxiii; see also Allen Wood's chapter in the same volume, 'Kant's Philosophy of History', pp. 243–62.
 37. A word Reagan did not shy away from, see 'We Will be a City Upon a Hill' (note 14).
 38. Niebuhr, *The Irony of History* (note 7).
 39. *Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament* (Washington, DC: The White House, 17 November 2011).

40. 'Obama's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, Denver', *New York Times*, 28 August 2008.
41. Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize* (Oslo: The White House, 10 December 2009).
42. *Ibid.*
43. Barack Obama, *State of Union Address* (Washington, DC: The White House, 25 January 2011), emphasis added.
44. Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya, National Defense University Washington, D.C.*, (Washington, DC: The White House, 28 March 2011)
45. Obama, *Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize* (note 41).
46. Barack Obama, 'Renewing American Leadership', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (July/August 2007), p. 2.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Obama, *Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square* (note 2).
49. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, p. 48,
50. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *US Department of Defense, Fiscal Year 2013 Budget Request, February 2012* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, February 2012).
53. See 'Defence Spending: Always More, or Else', *The Economist*, 1 December 2011.
54. Micah Zenko and Michael Cohen, 'Clear and Present Safety: The United States is More Secure than Washington Thinks', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (March/April 2012), pp. 79–93.
55. See Daniel Horner and Tom Collina, 'Obama Budget Highlights Stockpile Work', *Arms Control Today*, March 2010.
56. Hans Kristensen, 'B61-12: NNSA's Gold-Plated Nuclear Bomb Project, Federation of American Scientists, *FAS Strategic Security Blog*, 26 July 2012.
57. Obama, *Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square* (note 2).
58. Chris Schneidmiller, 'National Academies Report is Grist for CTBT Debate: Gottemoeller', *Global Security Newswire*, 15 June 2012.
59. Department of Defense, *The Nuclear Posture Review Report* (note 49), p. 12.
60. *US Strategic Forces under New Start, Fact Sheet* (Washington, DC: Arms Control Association, June 2010).
61. Obama, *Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square* (note 2).
62. US Department of Defense, *Fact Sheet: Increasing Transparency in the US Nuclear Weapons Stockpile*, (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 3 May 2010).
63. Amy Woolf, *US Strategic Nuclear Forces: Background, Developments, and Issues* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, November 2011).
64. Morton Halperin, 'A New Nuclear Posture', *Arms Control Today*, May 2010.
65. For an analysis of the relationships between US nuclear doctrine, negative security assurances, and arms control, see Andy Butfoy, 'Washington's Apparent Readiness to Start Nuclear War', *Survival*, Vol. 50, No. 5 (October–November 2008), pp. 115–40.
66. *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, (note 49), p. 15; Robert Bell, special assistant to the president for national security, 'Strategic Agreements and the CTB Treaty: Striking the Right Balance', *Arms Control Today*, January–February 1998.
67. John Kruzell, 'Gates Discusses New Nuclear Posture, US Relations with Karzai', *American Forces Press Service*, 11 April 2010. There is no suggestion here that such an option is likely to be implemented; but that is another point.
68. See Joanna Spear, 'More Business as Usual? The Obama Administration and the Nuclear Posture Review', *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 32, No.1 (April 2011), pp. 241–63; Mary Sheridan and Walter Pincus, 'Obama Must Decide Degree to which US Swears Off Nuclear Weapons', *The Washington Post*, 6 March 2010; David Sanger and Thom Shanker, 'White House is Rethinking Nuclear Policy', *The New York Times*, 28 February 2010; Julian Borger, 'Barack Obama Ready to Slash US Nuclear Arsenal', *The Guardian*, 20 September 2009.
69. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (note 49), p. 16.
70. Butfoy, 'Washington's Apparent Readiness to Start Nuclear War' (note 65).
71. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (note 49), pp. vi, viii, ix, xiii, 7, 17, 33, 46.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
73. See Hugh White, *Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy in the Age of Obama* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2010).

74. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (note 49), p. 21. See also US Department of Energy, *FY 2012 Stockpile Stewardship and Management Plan*, Report to Congress, 15 April 2011, <http://www.fas.org/programs/ssp/nukes/nuclearweapons/SSMP-FY2012.pdf> (accessed 22 August 2012).
75. For a closer look at aspects of the balance between change and continuity here, see Aiden Warren, 'The Promises of Prague versus Nuclear Realities: From Bush to Obama', *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (August 2011), pp. 432–57. In addition, for an overview of the reforms necessary to get to abolition, see Andy Butfoy, 'President Obama and Nuclear Disarmament', *Dissent*, August 2011.
76. See, for example: The Associated Press, 'US Considers Sharp Cuts to Nuclear Force', *CBS News*, 15 February 2012; and 'Implementation of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), and Plans for Future Reductions in Nuclear Warheads and Delivery Systems Post-New START Treaty', *Hearing before the Subcommittee on Strategic Forces of the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate*, 4 May 2011.
77. See, for instance, Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris, 'Reviewing Nuclear Guidance: Putting Obama's Words Into Action', *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 41, No. 11 (November 2011), available at http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011_11/Reviewing_Nuclear_Guidance_Putting_Obama_Words_Into_Action (accessed October 2012).
78. See, for instance, Spear, 'More Business as Usual? The Obama Administration and the Nuclear Posture Review' (note 68). For a look at how this factor played out in an earlier NPR exercise, see Janne Nolan, *An Elusive Consensus: Nuclear Weapons and American Security after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).
79. Obama, *Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square* (note 2).
80. See Richard Perle, 'Yes, Nukes: The Global Zero Utopia', *World Affairs*, March/April 2011.
81. See the table reproduced in Daryl Kimball and Tom Collina, 'Nuclear Weapons: Less is More', *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 3, No. 10 (July 2012), available at <http://www.armscontrol.org/node/5423> (accessed October 2012); *The Nuclear Posture Review Report* (note 49), p. iv.
82. David Mutimer, 'From Arms Control to Denuclearization: Governmentality and the Abolitionist Desire', *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (April 2011), pp. 57–75.
83. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
84. For an overview of the present US nuclear arsenal, see Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris, 'US nuclear Forces, 2012', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, (May–June 2012), pp. 84–91.
85. See Philip Taubman, *The Partnership: Five Cold Warriors and their Quest to Ban the Bomb* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012); and, for example, Tom Collina, 'Former STRATCOM Head Calls for Cuts', *Arms Control Today*, June 2012.
86. Paul Miller, 'American Grand Strategy and the Democratic Peace', *Survival*, Vol. 54, No. 2, (April–May 2012), pp. 49–76.
87. For instance, see E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Year's Crisis, 1991–1939* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).
88. See note 25, and Perle, 'Yes, Nukes: The Global Zero Utopia' (note 80).
89. White House aide, quoted in Indyk *et al.*, *Bending History* (note 29), p. 267.
90. See, for instance, William Arkin, 'Secret Plan Outlines the Unthinkable', *Los Angeles Times*, 10 March 2002.
91. Scott Sagan and Jane Vaynman, 'Reviewing the Nuclear Posture Review', *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 18, No.1 (March 2011), pp. 18–37. Other articles in this edition of the journal address how the NPR was received in individual countries.
92. Indyk *et al.*, *Bending History* (note 29), p. 274.
93. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
94. Spear, 'More Business as Usual?' (note 68), p. 246.
95. *Ibid.*
96. Bradley Roberts, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Missile defense, and Admiral John Roberti, Deputy Director for Strategy and Policy, J-5, the Joint Staff, Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable, 6 April 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/> (accessed 22 August 2012; emphasis added).
97. Indyk, *Bending History* (note 29), p. 21.
98. Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (note 22), p. 321.
99. Obama, *Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize* (note 41)...

100. 'Implementation of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and Plans for Future Reductions in Nuclear Warheads and Delivery Systems Post-New START Treaty' (note 76), the quotes are from Senator Jeff Sessions, pp. 2–3.
101. Kristensen and Norris, 'US nuclear forces, 2012' (note 84); Ray Acheson (ed.), *Assuring Destruction Forever: Nuclear Weapon Modernization Around the World* (New York: Reaching Critical Will, 2012).
102. *The Nuclear Posture Review Report* (note 49), pp. 48–9.
103. This issue reflects a long running argument in the arms control literature. See, for instance, Colin Gray, 'Arms Control Does Not Control Arms', *Orbis*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Summer 1993), pp. 333–48; and Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Did Peace Through Strength End the Cold War? Lessons from INF', *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Summer 1991), pp. 162–88.
104. However, there is an element of subjectivity to estimating nuclear force requirements. For one attempt, see James Cartwright *et al.*, *Modernizing US Nuclear Strategy, Force Structure and Posture* (Washington, DC: Global Zero, May 2012).
105. 'Implementation of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and Plans for Future Reductions in Nuclear Warheads and Delivery Systems Post-New START Treaty' (note 76), p. 6.
106. Although two qualifications are needed here: (a) Washington has settled on rough parity in strategic nuclear weapons with Russia; (b) largely due to the exclusion of numerous so-called non-strategic nuclear weapons from arms control, the United States has tolerated a Russian advantage in total numbers of nuclear warheads (although Congress has signaled this will not be tolerated for much longer). See Amy Woolf, *Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 2012). Few contest the point that America retains superiority in usable military power.
107. See, for example, Alexandra Homolar, 'How to Last Alone at the Top: US Strategic Planning for the Unipolar Era', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 34, No.2 (April 2011), pp. 189–217.