

CEU Annual Doctoral Conference 2015

An Exception That Proves the Rule? The Ambiguous American Exceptionalism within Liberal Order

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, a re-intensified discourse of *American exceptionalism* characterized U.S. foreign policy, which even explicitly reached presidential rhetoric in the official statements of Barack Obama. This is even more surprising considering the fact that the Bush administration's attempt for a unilateral re-interpretation of the rules of international conduct was widely perceived as a failure, and Obama himself also promised a reorientation of foreign policy. At the same time, exceptionalism is often understood in the context of a national ideology and internal developments, while structural factors receive less attention. However, the notion of exception also presupposes the existence of a rule, and in this paper, I exactly focus on this interplay between exception and rule. The argument starts from the observation that American leadership under Bush lost legitimacy partly because international order was mismanaged, or was not even managed at all, but merely the United States wanted to be exempted from rules. Here a distinction can be made between exceptionalism and *exemptionalism*, and from this, using the English School's concept of great power management, and recent theoretical contributions on hierarchies between states, I conceptualize exceptionalism as a particular form of great power management within liberal order. However, due to the inherent tensions within the principles and institutions of international society, this is necessarily an ambiguous process, manifesting itself in the unwritten and non-declared deviations from general rules in the conduct of the 'hegemon'. Finally, I illustrate this 'ambiguous exceptionalism' in the discourse and practice of the Obama administration, which can be seen as a counterpoint to the Bush administration's discredited practice.