



**MIDDLE EAST STUDIES IN ACTION
COMMITTEE FOR UNDERGRADUATE MIDDLE EAST STUDIES POSTER
SESSION, MESA 2023**

Historicizing American Exceptionalism: US Interventionism in Iran 1940s-1980s

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Scholars have traditionally attributed the CIA-backed coup in Iran (1953) to Western-based oil interests and the Iran-Contra Affair (1984-86) to misappropriations of power in the executive branch. However, these analyses fail to account for the underlying role of gendered and racist cultural norms prevalent among the elite political and non-political actors that surrounded the White House. Drawing on comics, political cartoons, newspaper articles, and transcripts from the Iran-Contra hearings, this paper redefines and historicizes American exceptionalism. Tracing the evolution of American exceptionalism from the 1940s to the 1980s, I argue that American exceptionalism manifested broadly to support U.S. imperialism. But, more specifically, its content evolved in conjunction with historical events of the 1940s and 1980s. Robert Vitalis identified the connection between race, American exceptionalism, and its role in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. He states that American exceptionalism is the belief that America's past is distinct and superior to all other nations. However, I found that American exceptionalism does not exist above history but instead is deeply historical. Therefore, the coup in Iran and the Iran-Contra Affair were rooted in American exceptionalism of varying forms. Shifts in the expressions of American exceptionalism between the 1953 coup and the Iran-Contra Affair were due to perceived threats made to American masculinity and white supremacy by the loss of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, respectively, and were compounded by the events of the Cold War.

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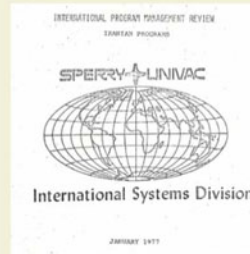
Thesis

By interrogating American foreign policy, I argue that American politicians, acting under the banner of American exceptionalism, act with impunity. Moreover, they maintain American hegemony by reproducing the military-industrial complex in other nations. Using the case study of American foreign policy in Iran from the 1953 Coup to the Iran–Contra Affair in 1987, this paper redefines American exceptionalism as a means of defending and reinventing America’s empire internationally.



The *T-Man* comic book series was a bimonthly publication by Quality Comics. The comic depicted Peter Trask, a U.S. treasury agent, as he fought the spread of communism and was based on files from the U.S. Treasury Department.

In Lockheed’s 1977 International Review, they detailed long-term plans to increase revenue and maintain relevance to the Shah by ingratiating themselves with interest groups, such as law enforcement, Iran’s Electronics Industries (IEI), the Civil Aviation Organization (CAO), and Iran’s Meteorological Organization (IMO).



Changes made to expressions of American exceptionalism were demanded by the following:

- Vietnam War Syndrome
- The Islamic Revolution
- The Civil Rights and Women’s Rights Movements
- The Cold War

Conclusion

By using race and gender as indicators of modernity, America maintains a supposed moral superiority over the Middle East that justifies its interventionism.

Cite this article: Acker RB (2024). Historicizing American Exceptionalism: US Interventionism in Iran 1940s–1980s. *Review of Middle East Studies* 57, 161–162. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2024.12>