The issue of America's "exceptionalist" view of itself is hardly new. The subtitle of this collection of insightful examinations of various aspects of human rights in the USA suggests an aspiration to somehow change this basic cultural reality. Any attempt to do so will most likely prove extremely controversial politically. Indeed this book, completed around the midterm of the Obama administration recognises "the opportunity" of his presidency but does not underestimate the enormity of changing a national mind-set which seems to perceive human rights as something "foreign and abstract". It might have been hoped that the Obama administration would have provided more opportunities to strengthen international human rights protection, in particular, through the mechanisms of the UN. Such expectations overlooked the basic premise on which the USA has engaged with the UN since the 1950s when Senator Bricker led efforts to block any possibility for domestic courts to take into account the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. This results, over 60 years, since the USA effectively launched the international human rights movement through the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights, in America now having the poorest track record of ratifying human rights treaties among all industrialised nations.

Like China, today, the USA still resists the ICCPR even if its political system and recognition of basic freedoms is quite different from that of its new great rival. Indeed the Obama administration includes many individuals with a strong record of advocacy or expertise in human rights The book contains many examples not just of the consequences of American "parochialism", but also of a tendency amongst many involved in campaigns for the civil rights of children, the disabled, LGBT citizens and the homeless to ignore the potential for invoking their basic human rights as recognised by the UN. However, any comparison between American and Chinese
exceptionalism would obviously have to take into account that in many areas America reaches higher standards of human rights protections without referring explicitly in national law to UN texts.

The chapter in this book dealing with the human rights implications of US federal and state disaster policies is a particularly convincing illustration of the cumulative nature of human rights violations with the USA failing to live up to UN standards for “internal displacement” which is what happens to a person whose home is suddenly washed away. The point being made is that in a rights-based framework, humanitarianism or disaster aid should be seen as a right not something provided at the discretion of authorities.

The various contributions to this book refer to the growing awareness of American activists of the relevance of international human rights norms for their very diverse campaigns. The roots of this reorientation “beyond civil rights” are traced back to Dr. King’s “second phase” and yet the atmosphere in which such matters are discussed in the USA today seems to be as controversial and politically charged as was the case in the 1960s.

Even more disturbingly, the authors provide numerous cases where the USA, in effect, adopts policies which violate internationally recognised human rights: single mothers are subjected to numerous human rights violations that reinforce their inability to attain an adequate standard of living; in 2004, Amnesty International for the first time took public positions on the human right to health care in the USA; any chance of the USA ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is blocked by legislator under pressure from those who see this Convention as an “assault on the American family”. On this subject, the USA managed to get outvoted (180 to 1) in the UN General Assembly in 2008.

Clearly the stories told in these various chapters are part of the story of American politics. The authors of the New Deal in the 1930s included many of those who contributed to the foundation of the UN and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1940s. Similarly the rhetoric of the neo-liberal resurgence has contributed to US isolation at the UN and made it very difficult for the Obama administration to chart a genuinely new course either at home or at the international level.

Such a volume is, however, a very valuable, down to earth guide to the very basic issues at stake as well as a reminder of the enormity of the challenges faced by Americans who do indeed want to go “beyond exceptionalism”. It does not deal with the issues relating to counterterrorism and their implications for human rights in the USA and other countries. By concentrating on purely domestic issues not always considered from a human rights perspective, this also confirms the real meaning of “bringing human rights home”.