

POLITICO

Trump fails to impress foreign-policy experts

A speech aimed at boosting his credibility got low marks from across the spectrum.

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April 27, 2016

In his address to an elite, invitation-only Washington foreign policy audience Wednesday, Donald Trump promised that, as president, he would restore a “coherent” vision to America’s role in the world.

But across the ideological spectrum, and even among natural allies, Trump’s speech received a failing grade for coherence and drew snickering and scorn from foreign policy insiders who remain unconvinced that Trump is up to the job.

“It struck me as a very odd mishmash,” said Doug Bandow, a foreign policy scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute, who shares many of Trump’s beliefs about scaling back America’s role abroad. “He called for a new foreign policy strategy, but you don’t really get the sense he gave one.”

Trump’s speech was “lacking in policy prescriptions,” and its “strident rhetoric masked a lack of depth,” said Robert “Bud” McFarlane, a former national security adviser to President Ronald Reagan who attended the speech.

Speaking at Washington’s Mayflower Hotel, Trump mostly repeated familiar themes from his campaign, including promises to cut better trade deals with China, swiftly defeat the Islamic State, rebuild the military and reduce the expense America incurs in upholding international security from Europe to Asia.

Trump spoke from a teleprompter and in tones that were subdued by the standards of his raucous rallies. He also unveiled a new theme, saying that the U.S. would “finally have a coherent foreign policy” based on narrow self-interest, economic gain and global stability.

But Trump offered few specifics about his strategy, focusing on the alleged “disasters” created by past presidents and a foreign policy establishment who “frankly don’t know what they’re doing, even though they may look awfully good writing for The New York Times or talking on television.”

Trump said he would surround himself with “talented experts” and “new people” to help him chart a global strategy. But even though he said on MSNBC’s “Morning Joe” earlier in the day that “I’ll be naming them today,” he did not do so.

The audience was heavier on celebrity journalists like Bob Woodward and Jake Tapper than on the sort of prominent foreign policy thinkers and former government officials typically present at similar appearances by presidential candidates. Trump has largely been shunned by foreign-policy veterans of past Republican administrations, more than 100 members of whom recently signed an open letter saying they would not join his administration; some have threatened to vote for Hillary Clinton over Trump in November.

One notable figure sitting in the front row as Trump repeated his call for better relations with Moscow — “I believe an easing of tensions and improved relations with Russia, from a position of strength, is possible. Common sense says this cycle of hostility must end,” Trump said — was Russia’s ambassador to Washington, Sergey Kislyak. (Trump “made some intriguing points, but we need to understand what is meant in the implementation,” Kislyak told POLITICO after the speech. “It needs to be started carefully.”)

Also in attendance was a Trump foreign policy adviser Walid Phares, a Lebanese Maronite Christian who applauded vigorously when Trump said the U.S. had “left Christians subject to intense persecution and even genocide.”

The address was hosted by The National Interest magazine, an intellectual journal not often spotted on Trump’s private jet, but one that promotes the so-called realist school of foreign policy, which holds that the U.S. should pursue narrowly defined security interests with little concern for missions like promoting democracy or overthrowing repressive regimes.

Some of Trump’s speech aligned with realist theory, including his disdain for U.S. interventions in the Arab world and what he called “the dangerous idea that we could make western democracies out of countries that had no experience or interest in becoming a western democracy.”

Under a Trump presidency, he said, “no American citizen will ever again feel that their needs come second to the citizens of foreign countries.”

But experts called Trump’s speech rife with internal tensions. He declared that “America First” would be the “major and overriding” theme of his presidency moments before hailing America’s role in World War II — which was opposed by the isolationist America First movement of the early 1940s. He trashed President Barack Obama for failing to follow through with his threatened September 2013 air strikes in Syria, while also lamenting the chaos that has followed U.S. military interventions in Iraq and Libya. And Trump vowed to mend ties with U.S. allies who are fearful that America is withdrawing from the world, while insisting they pay more for their own security.

The speech was “completely contradictory, in the sense that the first message is that we should make allies pay not just for the cost of having troops in their countries but for the entire defense that the U.S. provides to Europe and Asia, which he estimated at trillions of dollars. And then in the next breath, he said that the U.S. can’t be relied on and needs to be a better ally,” said Thomas Wright, a Brookings Institution fellow who has written extensively on Trump’s foreign policy.

“There’s just no way to reconcile these two statements. It certainly won’t reassure anyone internationally, or anyone within the Republican foreign policy establishment,” Wright added.

But Trump is also trying to broaden his electoral support, and some analysts said that the views of elites matter less than the populist sound bites about U.S. military and economic strength repeated on cable television Wednesday afternoon and evening.

Trump's complaint that America's NATO allies are not paying their fair share to support the European security alliance does echo at least one influential foreign policy thinker: Barack Obama, who in his address in Hanover, Germany, this week, scolded Europeans for being "complacent" about their own defense. Obama has also complained about "free riders" from Europe to the Arab Middle East enjoying the benefits of U.S. protection without spending or risking more themselves.

Obama has not however, explicitly threatened "to let these countries defend themselves," as Trump did Wednesday.

Not everyone was totally dismissive of the Manhattan mogul's appearance, including Zalmay Khalilzad, a former U.S. ambassador and a National Interest board member who introduced Trump on Wednesday.

"He offered a coherent framework not totally outside the mainstream American foreign policy debate," said Khalilzad, who held several senior foreign policy posts in the George W. Bush administration, including ambassador to Iraq and to Afghanistan.

"Of course," he added, "expectations were low."

Trump also left the hawkish Republican right deeply unimpressed. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a former 2016 presidential rival to Trump, issued a series of derisive tweets during the address, which he said was full of "disconnected thought" and demonstrated a "lack of understanding of threats we face."

"Ronald Reagan must be rolling over in his grave," Graham tweeted.