

The American Conservative

Peace Through Trump?

National interest builds a new foreign-policy coalition.

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October 24, 2016

Donald Trump played a wily capitalistic trick on his Republican opponents in the primary fights this year—he served an underserved market.

By now it's a cliché that Trump, while on his way to the GOP nomination, tapped into an unnoticed reservoir of right-of-center opinion on domestic and economic concerns—namely, the populist-nationalists who felt left out of the reigning market-libertarianism of the last few decades.

Indeed, of the 17 Republicans who ran this year, Trump had mostly to himself the populist issues: that is, opposition to open borders, to free trade, and to earned-entitlement cutting. When the other candidates were zigging toward the familiar—and unpopular—Chamber of Commerce-approved orthodoxy, Trump was zagging toward the voters.

Moreover, the same sort of populist-nationalist reservoir-tapping was evident in the realm of foreign affairs. To put it in bluntly Trumpian terms, the *New Yorker* hit 'em where they weren't.

The fact that Trump was doing something dramatically different became clear in the make-or-break Republican debate in Greenville, S.C., on February 13. Back in those early days of the campaign, Trump had lost one contest (Iowa) and won one (New Hampshire), and it was still anybody's guess who would emerge victorious.

During that debate, Trump took what seemed to be an extraordinary gamble: he ripped into George W. Bush's national-security record—in a state where the 43rd president was still popular. Speaking of the Iraq War, Trump said, “George Bush made a mistake. We can make mistakes. But that one was a beauty. We should have never been in Iraq. We have destabilized the Middle East.”

And then Trump went further, aiming indirectly at the former president, while slugging his brother Jeb directly: “The World Trade Center came down during your brother's reign, remember that.”

In response, Jeb intoned the usual Republican line, “He kept us safe.” And others on the stage in Greenville that night rushed to associate themselves with Bush 43.

In the aftermath of this verbal melee, many thought that Trump had doomed himself. As one unnamed Republican “strategist” chortled to *Politico*, “Trump’s attack on President George W. Bush was galactic-level stupid in South Carolina.”

Well, not quite: Trump triumphed in the Palmetto State primary a week later, winning by a 10-point margin.

Thus, as we can see in retrospect, something had changed within the GOP. After 9/11, in the early years of this century, South Carolinians had been eager to fight. Yet by the middle of the second decade, they—or at least a plurality of them—had grown weary of endless foreign war.

Trump’s victory in the Palmetto State was decisive, yet it was nevertheless only a plurality, 32.5 percent. Meanwhile, Sen. Marco Rubio, running as an unabashed neocon hawk, finished second.

So we can see that the Republican foreign-policy “market” is now segmented. And while Trump proved effective at targeting crucial segments, they weren’t the only segments—because, in actuality, there are four easily identifiable blocs on the foreign-policy right. And as we delineate these four segments, we can see that while some are highly organized and tightly articulate, others are loose and inchoate:

First, the libertarians. That is, the Cato Institute and other free-market think tanks, *Reason* magazine, and so on. Libertarians are not so numerous around the country, but they are strong among the intelligentsia.

Second, the old-right “isolationists.” These folks, also known as “paleocons,” often find common ground with libertarians, yet their origins are different, and so is their outlook. Whereas the libertarians typically have issued a blanket anathema to all foreign entanglements, the isolationists have been more selective. During World War I, for example, their intellectual forbears were hostile to U.S. involvement on the side of the Allies, but that was often because of specifically anti-English or pro-German sentiments, not because they felt guided by an overall principle of non-intervention. Indeed, the same isolationists were often eager to intervene in Latin America and in the Far East. More recently, the temperamentally isolationist bloc has joined with the libertarians in opposition to deeper U.S. involvement in the Middle East.

Third, the traditional hawks. On the proverbial Main Street, USA, plenty of people—not limited to the active-duty military, veterans, and law-enforcers—believe that America’s national honor is worth fighting for.

Fourth, the neoconservatives. This group, which takes hawkishness to an avant-garde extreme, is so praised, and so criticized, that there’s little that needs be added here. Yet we can say this: as with the libertarians, they are concentrated in Washington, DC; by contrast, out beyond the Beltway, they are relatively scarce. Because of their connections to big donors to both parties, however, they have been powerful, even preeminent, in foreign-policy circles over the last quarter-century. Yet today, it’s the neocons who feel most threatened by, and most hostile to, the Trump phenomenon.

We can pause to offer a contextual point: floating somewhere among the first three categories—libertarians, isolationists, hawks—are the foreign-policy realists. These, of course, are the people, following in the tradition of the great scholar Hans Morgenthau, who pride themselves

on seeing the world as it is, regarding foreign policy as just another application of Bismarckian wisdom—“the art of the possible.”

The realists, disproportionately academics and think-tankers, are a savvy and well-credentialed group—or, according to critics, cynical and world-weary. Yet either way, they have made many alliances with the aforementioned trio of groups, even as they have usually maintained their ideological flexibility. To borrow the celebrated wisdom of the 19th-century realpolitiker Lord Palmerston, realists don’t have permanent attachments; they have permanent interests. And so it seems likely that if Trump wins—or anyone like Trump in the future—many realists will be willing to emerge from their wood-paneled precincts to engage in the hurly-burly of public service.

Returning to our basic quartet of blocs, we can quickly see that two of them, the libertarians and the neocons, have been loudly successful in the “battle of ideas.” That is, almost everyone knows where the libertarians and the neocons stand on the controversies of the moment. Meanwhile, the other two groups—the isolationists and the traditional hawks—have failed to make themselves heard. That is, until Trump.

For the most part, the isolationists and hawks have not been organized; they’ve just been clusters of veterans, cops, gun owners, and like-minded souls gathering here and there, feeling strongly about the issues but never finding a national megaphone. Indeed, even organized groups, such as the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, sizable as they might be, have had little impact, of late, on foreign affairs.

This paradoxical reality—that even big groups can be voiceless, allowing smaller groups to carry the day—is well understood. Back in 1839, the historian Thomas Carlyle observed of his Britain, “The speaking classes speak and debate,” while the “deep-buried [working] class lies like an Enceladus”—a mythological giant imprisoned under a volcano. Yet, Carlyle continued, the giant under the volcano will not stay silent forever; one day it will erupt, and the inevitable eruption “has to produce earthquakes!”

In our time, Trump has provoked the Enceladus-like earthquake. Over the past year, while the mainstream media has continued to lavish attention on the fine points of libertarianism and neoconservatism, the Peoples of the Volcano have blown up American politics.

Trump has spoken loudly to both of his groups. To the isolationists, he has highlighted his past opposition to the Iraq and Libya misadventures, as well as his suspicions about NATO and other alliances. (Here the libertarians, too, are on board.) At the same time, he has also talked the language of the hawks, as when he has said, “Take the oil” and “Bomb the [bleep] out of them.” Trump has also attacked the Iran nuclear agreement, deriding it as “one of the worst deals ever made.”

Thus earlier this year Trump mobilized the isolationists and the hawks, leaving the libertarians to Rand Paul and the neocons to Rubio.

Now as we move to the general election, it appears that Trump has kept the loyalty of his core groups. Many libertarians, meanwhile, are voting for Gary Johnson—the former Republican governor at the top of the Libertarian Party’s ticket—and they are being joined, most likely as a

one-off, by disaffected Republicans and Democrats. Meanwhile, the neocons, most of them, have become the objective allies, if not the overt supporters, of Hillary Clinton.

Even if Trump loses, his energized supporters, having found their voice, will be a new and important force within the GOP—a force that could make it significantly harder for a future president to, say, “liberate” and “democratize” Syria.



Yet now we must skip past the unknown unknowns of the election and ask: what might we expect if Trump becomes president?

One immediate point to be borne in mind is that it will be a challenge to fill the cabinet and the sub-cabinet—to say nothing of the thousands of “Schedule C” positions across the administration—with true Trump loyalists. Yes, of course, if Trump wins that means he will have garnered 50 million or more votes, but still, the number of people who have the right credentials and can pass all the background checks—including, for most of the top jobs, Senate confirmation—is minuscule.

So here we might single out the foreign-policy realists as likely having a bright future in a Trump administration: after all, they are often well-credentialed and, by their nature, have prudently tended to keep their anti-Trump commentary to a minimum. (There’s a piece of inside-the-Beltway realist wisdom that seems relevant here: “You’re for what happens.”)

Yet the path to realist dominion in a Trump administration is not smooth. As a group, they have been in eclipse since the Bush 41 era, so an entire generation of their cadres is missing. The realists do not have long lists of age-appropriate alumni ready for another spin through the revolving door.

By contrast, the libertarians have lots of young staffers on some think-tank payroll or another. And of course, the neocons have lots of experience and contacts—yes, they screwed up the last time they were in power, but at least they know the jargon.

Thus, unless president-elect Trump makes a genuinely heroic effort to infuse his administration with new blood, he will end up hiring a lot of folks who might not really agree with him—and who perhaps even have strongly, if quietly, opposed him. That means that the path of a Trump presidency could be channeled in an unexpected direction, as the adherents of other foreign-policy schools—including, conceivably, schools from the left—clamber aboard. As they say in DC, “personnel is policy.”

Still, Trump has a strong personality, and it’s entirely possible that, as president, he will succeed in imprinting his unique will on his appointees. (On the other hand, the career government, starting with the State Department’s foreign service officers, might well prove to be a different story.)

Looking further ahead, as a hypothetical President Trump surveys the situation from the Sit Room, here are nine things that will be in view:

1.

Trump will recall, always, that the Bush 43 presidency drove itself into a ditch on Iraq. So he will surely see the supreme value of not sending U.S. ground troops—beyond a few advisors—into Middle Eastern war zones.

2.

Trump will also realize that Barack Obama, for all his talk about hope and change, ended up preserving the bulk of Bush 43's policies. The only difference is that Obama did it on the cheap, reducing defense spending as he went along.

Obama similar to Bush—really? Yes. To be sure, Obama dropped all of Bush's democratic messianism, but even with his cool detachment he kept all of Bush's alliances and commitments, including those in Afghanistan and Iraq. And then he added a new international commitment: "climate change."

In other words, America now has a policy of "quintuple containment": Russia, China, Iran, ISIS/al-Qaeda, and, of course, the carbon-dioxide molecule. Many would argue that today we aren't managing any of these containments well; others insist that the Obama administration, perversely, seems most dedicated to the containment of climate change: everything else can fall apart, but if the Obamans can maintain the illusion of their international CO2 deals, as far as they are concerned all will be well.

In addition, Uncle Sam has another hundred or so minor commitments—including bilateral defense treaties with countries most Americans have never heard of, along with special commitments to champion the rights of children, women, dissidents, endangered species, etc. On a one-by-one basis, it's possible to admire many of these efforts; on a cumulative basis, it's impossible to imagine how we can sustain all of them.

3.

A populist president like Trump will further realize that if the U.S. has just 4 percent of the world's population and barely more than a fifth of world GDP, it's not possible that we can continue to police the planet. Yes, we have many allies—on paper. Yet Trump's critique of many of them as feckless, even faithless, resonated for one big reason: it was true.

So Trump will likely begin the process of rethinking U.S. commitments around the world. Do we really want to risk nuclear war over the Spratly Islands? Or the eastern marches of Ukraine? Here, Trump might well default to the wisdom of the realists: big powers are just that—big powers—and so one must deal with them in all their authoritarian essentiality. And as for all the other countries of the world—some we like and some we don't—we're not going to change them, either. (Although in some cases, notably Iraq and Syria, partition, supervised by the great powers, may be the only solution.)

4.

Trump will surely see world diplomacy as an extension of what he has done best all his life—making deals. This instinct will serve him well in two ways: first, he will be sharply separating himself from his predecessors, Bush the hot-blooded unilateralist war-of-choicer and Obama the cool and detached multilateralist leader-from-behind. Second, his deal-making desire will inspire

him do what needs to be done: build rapport with world leaders as a prelude to making things happen.

To cite one immediate example: there's no way that we will ever achieve anything resembling "peace with honor" in Afghanistan without the full cooperation of the Taliban's masters in Pakistan. Ergo, the needed deal must be struck in Islamabad, not Kabul.

Almost certainly, a President Trump will treat China and Russia as legitimate powers, not as rogue states that must be single-handedly tamed by America.

Moreover, Trump's deal-making trope also suggests that instead of sacrificing American economic interests on the altar of U.S. "leadership," he will view the strengthening of the American economy as central to American greatness.

5.

Trump will further realize that his friends the realists have had a blind spot of late when it comes to economic matters. Once upon a time—that is, in the 19th century—economic nationalism was at the forefront of American foreign-policy making. In the old days, as America's Manifest Destiny stretched beyond the continental U.S., expansionism and Hamiltonianism went together: as they used to say, trade follows the flag. Theodore Roosevelt's digging of the Panama Canal surely ranks as one of the most successful fusions of foreign and economic policy in American history.

Yet in the past few decades, the economic nationalists and the foreign-policy realists have drifted apart. For example, a Reagan official, Clyde Prestowitz of the Economic Strategy Institute, has been mostly ignored by the realists, who have instead embraced the conventional elite view of free trade and globalization.

So a President Trump will have the opportunity to reunite realism and economic nationalism; he can once again put manufacturing exports, for example, at the top of the U.S. agenda. Indeed, Trump might consider other economic-nationalist gambits: for example, if we are currently defending such wealthy countries as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Norway, why aren't they investing some of the trillions of dollars in their sovereign-wealth funds into, say, American infrastructure?

6.

Trump will also come into power realizing that he has few friends in the foreign-policy establishment; after all, most establishmentarians opposed him vehemently. Yet that could turn out to be a real plus for the 45th president because it could enable him to discard the stodgy and outworn thinking of the "experts." In particular, he could refute the prevailing view that the U.S. is, and always must be, the benign hegemon, altruistically policing the world, while allowing its allies, satellites—and even rivals—to manufacture everything and thereby generate the jobs, profits, and knowhow. That was always, of course, a view that elevated the ambitions and pretensions of the American elite over the well-being of the larger U.S. population—and maybe Trump can come up with a better and fairer vision.

7.

As an instinctive deal-maker, Trump will have the capacity to clear away the underbrush of accumulated obsolete doctrines and dogmas. To cite just one small but tragic example, there's the dopey chain of thinking that has guided U.S. policy toward South Sudan. Today, we officially condemn both sides in that country's ongoing civil war. Yet we might ask, how can that work out well for American interests? After all, one side or the other is going to win, and we presumably want a friend in Juba, not a Chinese-affiliated foe.

On the larger canvas, Trump will observe that if the U.S., China, and Russia are the three countries capable of destroying the world, then it's smart to figure out *amodus vivendi* among this threesome. Such practical deal-making, of course, would undermine the moralistic narrative that Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin are the potentates of new evil empires.

8.

Whether or not he's currently familiar with the terminology, Trump seems likely to recapitulate the "multipolar" system envisioned by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger in the 1970s. Back then, the multipolar vision included the U.S., the USSR, Western Europe, China, and Japan.

Yet multipolarity was lost in the '80s, as the American economy was Reaganized, the Cold War grew colder, and the Soviet Union staggered to its self-implosion. Then in the '90s we had the "unipolar moment," when the U.S. enjoyed "hyper-power" primacy.

Yet as with all moments, unipolarity soon passed, undone by the Iraq quagmire, America's economic stagnation, and the rise of other powers. So today, multipolarity seems destined to re-emerge with a slightly upgraded cast of players: the U.S., China, Russia, the European Union, and perhaps India.

9.

And, of course, Trump will have to build that wall along the U.S.-Mexican border.



Some might object that I am reading too much into Trump. Indeed, the conventional wisdom, even today, maintains that Trump is visceral, not intellectual, that he is buffoonish, not Kissingerian.

To such critics, this Trump supporter feels compelled to respond: when has the conventional wisdom about the New Yorker been proven correct?

It's not easy to become president. In all of U.S. history, just 42 individuals have been elected to the presidency—or to the vice presidency and succeeded a fallen president. That is, indeed, an exclusive club. Or as Trump himself might say, it's not a club for dummies.

If Trump does, in fact, become the 45th president, then by definition, he will have proven himself to be pretty darn strategic. And that's a portent that bodes well for his foreign policy.