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Trump the Militarist

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Tom Wright thinks he has identified Trump's "Jekyll and Hyde foreign policy," and he tries to explain the reasons for it. This passage struck me as odd:

The second thing we know is that Trump's worldview is in a tiny minority within his own administration. His national security team is primarily composed of people who want to maintain U.S. alliances, an open global economy and support for universal values. The reason why Trump ended up with such a team is, in part, because there are no think tanks or academic cabals that are working out how to translate his visceral beliefs into policy. Those who one might expect to be sympathetic—the CATO Institute and academic isolationists—are not [bold mine-DL]. The Heritage Foundation foreign policy team spends most of its time denying he really believes what he clearly believes. With no lieutenants of his own, he had to turn to outsiders. With a penchant for the finest military officers the country has produced and one billionaire, he chose a Cabinet of mainstreamers. Whether it was by intent or design, the effect of his choice was to voluntarily surrender the bureaucracy to ideological opponents of his America First worldview.

It is a significant problem for Wright's interpretation of Trump's foreign policy that Trump's administration doesn't contain many people that agree with his supposedly "visceral beliefs." If Trump has surrounded himself with many conventional hawks and "mainstream" Republicans, is it not more plausible that his views on most foreign policy issues are in line with theirs or so unformed as to be easily changed? Insofar as Trump has a definable worldview, Wright has spent a lot of time trying to shove Trump into a category that doesn't fit him very well, and that has led him to miss something important.

No doubt Trump would have difficulty staffing a whole administration with only people committed to a genuine America First foreign policy, but almost everyone interested in that foreign policy or anything like it understands that Trump's definition of "America first" is very different and has very little in common with theirs. It is a much bigger problem for Wright's argument that the people Wright assumes should be sympathetic to Trump's foreign policy aren't. Indeed, foreign policy specialists at Cato have frequently been scathing in their criticisms of Trump both during the campaign and since his inauguration, because they can see very clearly

that he isn't interested in anything like the restrained, non-interventionist foreign policy they want. As for the unnamed "academic isolationists," it is harder to know which ones Wright is referring to, since no one identifies as an "isolationist" and the label is guaranteed to be a misrepresentation of their views. For my part, it seems obvious that Trump's foreign policy isn't focused on prioritizing American interests or keeping America at peace, but seems preoccupied with picking potentially costly fights with many other states at once.

The solution to Wright's "Jekyll/Hyde" puzzle was offered by Stephen Wertheim a few weeks ago in a valuable op-ed that finally placed Trump in the correct foreign policy camp. Wertheim objected to labeling him or anyone else an "isolationist," and went on to say this:

[Isolationist] is often an unfair label, but it's especially nonsensical when it comes to the current commander in chief: Trump is no isolationist, whether caricatured or actual. **Rather than seeking to withdraw from the world, he vows to exploit it** [bold mine-DL]. Far from limiting the area of war, he threatens ruthless violence against globe-spanning adversaries and glorifies martial victory. In short, the president is a militarist.

One key to understanding Trump's foreign policy is that his version of "America first" has almost nothing in common with the tradition normally identified with that name. He latched on to the phrase when he heard it, but for him it doesn't refer to keeping the U.S. out of foreign wars, neutrality, or minding our own business. I think for Trump it means above all that America should be in first place in the world, and we should "beat" any other competitors that come along by whatever means necessary. This is why Trump is fixated on "winning" and making America great, and it helps explain why he thinks that the U.S. is currently getting ripped off in everything.

Trump seems to have no serious objection to most of what the U.S. does around the world except for the parts that don't involve the military, and I assume that he has disdain for diplomacy and diplomats because he thinks they produce bad "deals" for us regardless of the details. If we recognize that Trump is a militarist, his desire to throw more money into a bloated military budget while weakening every other aspect of U.S. foreign policy comes as no surprise. It accounts for his belligerent rhetoric, his preference for former and current military officers as advisers and appointees, and his repeated statements that the U.S. should seize other nations' resources by force. No other label fits him as well as this one.