



Trade War: Obama, Trump Battle Over Massive Deals

It's the professor vs. the populist firebrand.

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President Barack Obama and presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump are waging war over global trade, pitting professorial pro-trade lectures against fiery denunciations of globalization.

The billionaire businessman has made his opposition to massive trade deals a cornerstone of his White House bid. He has blasted past pacts like the North American Free Trade Agreement and pending ones like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, using words like “disaster” and “catastrophe” and “waste” to describe them, often to massive applause.

Just this week, at a Tuesday campaign stop in St. Clairsville, Ohio, Trump dubbed the Obama-negotiated TPP deal with Pacific Rim nations “a continuing rape of our country.” The Manhattan mogul admitted that his choice of words was “harsh,” but he told the Ohio crowd he does so when discussing the proposed trade deal because “that’s what it is.”

“Our founding fathers understood trade much better than our current politicians, believe me,” Trump said Wednesday in Pennsylvania, among the Rust Belt states hit hard by lost manufacturing jobs. “NAFTA was the worst trade deal in the history ... of this country. ... Not only will the TPP undermine our economy, but it will undermine our independence.”

Dan Ikenson, director of the CATO Institute’s Center for Trade Policy Studies, said Trump and Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont have made “trade one of the primary issues of debate in this election.”

Hillary Clinton, the presumptive Democratic nominee, helped lay the framework for the TPP as Obama’s first-term secretary of State before announcing her opposition this year to the final product. That leaves her in a tough spot, and Obama as one of the few Democrats arguing in favor of multi-country trade pacts as the election heats up.

Peter Francia, a political science professor at East Carolina University who follows trade issues, predicts that as Election Day nears, “Obama will stay very quiet on the issue” because he will “recognize that it’s tremendously unpopular with organized labor.” That is a key Democratic voting base, and one with which Trump has made some inroads, experts say.

“I think the president will sprinkle trade and TPP in,” Francia said, “but he won’t make a big focus.”

So far, however, the president continues to defend trade deals and free trade among multiple countries almost weekly.

Obama is not worried about politically damaging Clinton or other Democratic candidates by so regularly or forcefully discussing trade and global deals, Press Secretary Josh Earnest said Thursday.

And after Trump fired off a list of anti-trade blasts this week, Obama was back on his soapbox Wednesday in Ottawa at a summit with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto. "The reason the president was talking about it yesterday is because two of our most important trading partners were attending the summit alongside the president of the United States," Earnest said.

Asked if the commander in chief would continue to make regular trade and TPP pitches during the election season, Earnest said Obama plans to make a case for the kinds of economic policies on which he and Clinton agree. In an apparent olive branch to Sanders supporters, the president acknowledged that “ordinary people who have concerns about trade have a legitimate gripe about globalization.”

Where Trump seems to target lower-class voters’ emotions while railing against massive trade pacts, Obama, a former University of Chicago Law School professor, reverts to what can sound like a graduate-level lecture.

“The prescription of withdrawing from trade deals and focusing solely on your local market, that’s the wrong medicine,” Obama said during a press conference Wednesday with his Canadian and Mexican counterparts .

“First of all, because it’s not feasible, because our auto plants, for example, would shut down if we didn’t have access to some parts in other parts of the world,” he said. So we’d lose jobs and the amount of disruption that would be involved would be enormous.

“Secondly, we’d become less efficient. Costs of our goods in our own countries would become much more expensive,” Obama said, adding that the American idea of working one’s way into the middle class “has been undermined far more by automation than it has been by outsourcing or the shift of jobs to low-income or low-wage countries.”

One senior Republican senator, who is pro-trade and has been on several Trump vice presidential shortlists, said Obama and other critics of the likely GOP nominee's trade views have it all wrong.

“What Trump, I think, is getting at is the need to have fair trade and that our trade deals are enforced in the first place,” said Senate Republican Conference Chairman John Thune of South Dakota. “And that good deals are negotiated in the first place.”

That's exactly the tone Trump struck during parts of his remarks in Pennsylvania, one of his more buttoned-down and policy focused speeches.

“We need bilateral trade deals,” he said. “I am going to appoint the toughest and smartest, and I know them all, trade negotiators to fight on behalf of American workers.

“I'm going to tell our NAFTA partners that I intend to immediately renegotiate the terms of that agreement to get a better deal by a lot,” the real estate mogul said. “Not just a little, by a lot for our workers.”

Still, the president seems eager to rebut Trump's trade pronouncements and paint them as a danger to the U.S. economy — and the very voters that compose his base.

To that end, Obama's overall pro-trade message in Canada could be summed up by his warning that “cutting off” the spigot of massive trade deals would only “make all of us poorer.”