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Trump Is the Ignorant Candidate Ignorant Americans Deserve

A. Trevor Thrall

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Donald Trump's inconsistency on foreign policy has the Washington punditry in a tizzy. His disjointed and, frankly, ignorant responses to questions on basic matters of international security in the Republican debates, on the campaign trail, and, more recently, in long interviews with the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* editorial boards leave much to be desired from a potential commander in chief.

And yet: For all the complaints about how he doesn't know what the nuclear triad is, or has no grasp on the realities of NATO, or his unconstitutional-sounding plans to deal with immigrants and refugees, Trump's positions are often more in tune with the typical Republican — and even the average American — than Twitter pundits would like to acknowledge. Sadly, a major reason for this is that the American public is as ignorant about foreign policy as Donald Trump.

Take Trump's calls to ban Muslims from entering the country or to track them in databases. The former has the support of 36 percent of the general public and 59 percent of Republicans, while 44 percent of the public and 60 percent of Republicans back the latter, according to recent polls. Such sentiments may be difficult to comprehend, until we consider that for many Americans, "Islam," "Muslim," and the "Middle East" remain rather vague concepts — even after some 15 years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Only 42 percent of Americans in a 2011 Pew Research Center survey could correctly identify the crescent and star as the symbol for Islam from a set of four symbols, two of which were the Christian cross and the Star of David.

Even fewer Americans — including, at crucial times, many counterterrorism officials and political leaders — understand the difference between the Sunni and Shiite sects of Islam, one of the major contributors to terrorism and conflict in the Middle East over the past several decades. Just 20 percent of Americans in 2008 knew that Sunnis represent the largest group of Muslims in the world. Only 29 percent in a 2014 poll could identify Iran as the Shiite-majority nation from a list of four. And after years of war in the Middle East and confrontation with al Qaeda and the Islamic State, Americans remain stubbornly ignorant of even the basic geography of the region. In 2013, Pew found that only 50 percent of Americans could identify Syria when it was highlighted on a map of the Middle East.

Trump also aligns neatly with the public when it comes to his "America First" approach to alliances and foreign aid. One of his central arguments has been that the United States spends too much on its allies, whether that means South Korea, Japan, or NATO. This is a clever political

position. A majority of Americans routinely support cutting military and economic aid to other countries, preferring to invest money at home rather than abroad. The problem is that most Americans simply have no idea what the United States spends on foreign aid. More than half of respondents in a 2010 poll by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland reported that they believed the United States spent at least a quarter of the entire federal budget on foreign aid. The real figure is roughly 1 percent.

As a final example, Trump has called the Iran nuclear deal “one of the worst things that I’ve ever seen negotiated of any kind. It’s just a horrible giveaway.” Here again, Trump is on solid ground with the public, if not on the facts. According to the most recent Gallup poll, 57 percent of the general public disapproves of the deal, and Republicans overwhelming despise it: Only 9 percent support it.

In his recent meeting with the *Times* editorial board, Trump argued that the United States had been foolish to give Iran “\$150 billion” and that, even worse, Iran has not bought anything from the United States since the lifting of sanctions. Trump clearly misunderstood, first of all, that the United States was not, in fact, “giving” Iran money but merely releasing existing assets frozen under the sanctions. And as the *Times* editorial board later complained, Trump also appeared blissfully unaware that Iran is unable to purchase U.S.-made industrial goods, thanks to ongoing American sanctions.

Thankfully for Trump, his ignorance on Iran and nuclear weapons more generally is well-matched by the public. In an April 2015 Associated Press poll conducted at the time the preliminary agreement with Tehran was struck, 55 percent of the public admitted that it had not followed news of the Iran deal closely; in July 2015, 21 percent admitted in a Pew survey that they had heard nothing at all. More strikingly, repeated polling has revealed that Americans (even many members of Congress) have no idea how many nuclear weapons the United States possesses, much less any other nation.

Unfortunately, the public’s ignorance about foreign affairs is nothing new. Presidents and political observers have complained about it since the nation’s founding, and pollsters have documented it since the dawn of scientific polling in the 1940s. The charitable view is that people have better things to do with their time than think about politics and, therefore, remain “rationally ignorant” about the world until forced by war or crisis to pay attention. From this perspective, since the United States enjoys a high level of security thanks to its immense military and economic power as well as its favorable geography, it is quite reasonable for the average American not to know what is going on many thousands of miles away.

A less charitable view is that Americans, thanks to their geographic isolation as well as their sense of exceptionalism, have developed an indifference to the rest of the world. And because the U.S. news media can only feed the public what it’s willing to consume, the result is a significant gap between what Americans know about the world and what other publics know about the world.

Regardless of which view one takes, what the public knows or doesn’t know about the world matters when things get serious. That’s why presidents have always struggled to educate the public to build support for their foreign policies, though with mixed results. On the one hand, Franklin D. Roosevelt had a tough time convincing the public about the dangers of Adolf Hitler

until Pearl Harbor made it possible for the United States to enter World War II. George W. Bush, on the other hand, convinced much of the public that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, when it, in fact, did not.

What makes today different is that the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination doesn't want to educate the public. Instead, Trump is leading a modern Know Nothing movement. His ignorance has untethered him from Washington orthodoxies and allowed him to push a portfolio of wildly inconsistent yet popular positions that no other candidate — Republican or Democrat — would contemplate. What makes this so scary is that the American people seem all too happy to follow a leader whose rhetoric feeds their fears and skepticism about the world.

Trevor Thrall is a senior fellow for the Cato Institute's Defense and Foreign Policy Department. Thrall is an associate professor at George Mason University's School of Policy, Government, and International Affairs.