



Rubio Goes Nationalist

John McCormack

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In June 2016, Marco Rubio changed his mind and announced that he would not be retiring from the Senate as he had planned. A major reason he was seeking a second term, Rubio said, was to help the Senate exercise what “could end up being its most important [role] in the years to come: the constitutional power to act as a check and balance on the excesses of a president”—whether that would be President Clinton or President Trump.

After rattling off his concerns about Hillary Clinton, Rubio said: “The prospect of a Trump presidency is also worrisome to me. It is no secret that I have significant disagreements with Donald Trump. His positions on many key issues are still unknown. And some of his statements, especially about women and minorities, I find not just offensive but unacceptable. If he is elected, we will need senators willing to encourage him in the right direction, and if necessary, stand up to him. I’ve proven a willingness to do both.”

Rubio then defeated a populist, Trumpian primary challenger that August by 54 percentage points. He went on to win by 8 points in the general election that November, while Donald Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in Florida by 1 point. Other conservative GOP senators outperformed Trump in the key battleground states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. And Trump’s approval rating today is mired in the 40s despite a roaring economy. Yet the lesson of 2016 for many Republicans is that they need to be more like Trump.

One of those Republicans appears to be Marco Rubio. The Florida senator fully backs Trump’s trade war with China. “The most catastrophic thing that could happen is not a trade war, but that we lose one, or that we back down from one,” Rubio tells me in an interview.

Earlier this summer, Rubio delivered a speech in Washington calling for a “new nationalism” in which he decried an “economic elitism that has replaced a commitment to the dignity of work with a blind faith in financial markets and that views America simply as an economy instead of a nation.”

“I saw the devastating impact of this kind of thinking firsthand during my campaign for president,” Rubio told the Faith and Freedom Conference. “I saw it in the factory towns hollowed out by the companies who shipped those jobs overseas to turn a bigger profit—and

where the dignity of work has been replaced by food stamps and disability checks and opioids.” You just might say that Rubio painted a picture of “American carnage,” to borrow a phrase from the Trump inaugural address.

Whereas big tech companies were once featured in his speeches as examples of American innovation, Rubio now warns of a lack of corporate morality and patriotism: “When right and wrong is based entirely and solely on profitability, then there is nothing immoral about shipping jobs overseas or surrendering key American technology and innovation to China.” He singled out Google for refusing to work with the Department of Defense but contemplating a return to China.

Even when dissenting from Trump administration policy, some of Rubio’s tweets have a more Trumpian flair these days. “I know for a FACT that @FLOTUS has been a strong voice of compassion for migrant children. The vicious treatment of her over the last day is a reminder of how Trump Derangement Syndrome, where hatred for him justifies everything, has become an epidemic. Totally lunacy everywhere!!!” Rubio tweeted in June, when the issue of separating children from parents who had unlawfully crossed the border was dominating headlines. “Sadly #China is out-negotiating the administration & winning the trade talks right now. They have avoided tariffs & got a #ZTE deal without giving up anything meaningful in return by using N.Korea talks & agriculture issues as leverage. This is #NotWinning,” Rubio also tweeted that month.

What Rubio is trying to achieve appears to be a synthesis of his own “reform conservatism” and Trumpism. It is, for the most part, not an ideological reinvention. It’s more of a rethinking or a rebranding, as the *Economist* (“Marco’s Makeover”) and the *New Yorker* (“Rubio’s Reboot for the Trump Era”) have observed. And that makes a certain amount of sense as a matter of politics and policy. Trump is after all the Republican president, and the Republican party may increasingly become the home of working-class voters in the years to come.

Asked how Trump has changed the Republican party, for good or ill, Rubio has only positive things to say. “One of the things the president was able to do through his election is reconnect the Republican party to working Americans. It was probably a needed correction. It was the party that was heavily focused on the employer’s side, which is still very important, but not enough on the employee’s side,” Rubio tells me. “The early inklings of that were the Huckabee campaign and Santorum in 2012. All of them sort of nibbled at the edges of it. The president was able to truly embrace it, and I think that’s a very positive thing.”

Rubio now speaks with President Trump “I would say twice, three times a month.” He worked closely with Ivanka Trump on developing a paid-family-leave bill that would give Americans the option of taking some of their Social Security for family leave in exchange for delaying retirement by three to six months. “Ivanka views her role as sort of the host of a competition of ideas,” Rubio says. “She’s trying to encourage people to come forward, so we’re going to be the first entrant into this competition on the Republican side.” After Rubio unveiled his bill, Utah senator Mike Lee announced he intends to introduce his own paid-family-leave bill soon with Iowa senator Joni Ernst. Welcome to “Celebrity Apprentice: Paid Family Leave Edition.”

While Rubio called for a “new nationalism” in June, the speech focused heavily on the need to strengthen families and civil society. It was the kind of nationalism admired more by David Brooks than Steve Bannon. (“This is one of the best and most unifying Republican speeches in years,” the *New York Times* columnist tweeted.) Rubio steeped his new nationalism in the language of the Declaration of Independence. “Nothing is more American than the belief that all men are created equal. Nothing is more American than the belief that every human being is endowed by God with the inalienable right to life and liberty and to pursue happiness,” Rubio said. “This is the kind of new nationalism we need. And this is the kind of new nationalism we should insist new immigrants embrace.” After the speech, Rubio told me he doesn’t see a distinction between the kind of nationalism he was calling for and patriotism. He acknowledged the nationalist label is “often used to describe people who believe that they should only do things that are good for their country and at the expense of other countries” but said he rejects that view.

To the “old nationalists” like Bannon and Trump adviser Stephen Miller, of course, Rubio is the poster boy for economic elitism and globalism for his membership in the bipartisan Gang of Eight that wrote the 2013 comprehensive immigration reform bill. Asked if the backlash to the Gang of Eight bill, which passed the Senate but never got a vote in the House, led to Trump’s nomination, Rubio sidesteps the question and instead talks about how voters are frustrated with illegal immigrants breaking the law and competing with them for jobs. Asked about Arkansas GOP senator Tom Cotton’s argument that we need to cut legal immigration numbers because new immigrants are putting downward pressure on wages, Rubio says there are “elements of truth” to the argument. “What those numbers are is to be debated and should be able to adjust given changes in conditions in the economy,” Rubio says. “What I don’t know is if we can just set an arbitrary cap.”

Some of Rubio’s rhetoric on economics, including his condemnation of a “radical you’re-on-your-own individualism promoted by our government and by our society over the last 30 years,” seems new for him. But most of the actual economic policies Rubio has been prominently fighting for in Congress—an expanded child tax credit to benefit the working class and the paid-family leave bill—are of the same type he has long promoted with Utah senator Mike Lee.

In the tax reform bill last year, Rubio and Lee worked to deliver for working-class voters—the “47 percent” Mitt Romney insulted for not paying income tax in 2012 and who swung dramatically toward Trump in 2016. Rubio and Lee pushed for a bigger child tax credit and wanted the \$2,000 per child credit to apply against Social Security and Medicare taxes as well, in order to benefit the vast majority of working-class voters who don’t pay income taxes. They successfully got Senate negotiators to make \$1,400 of tax credit refundable instead of \$1,100.

When Rubio and Lee introduced an amendment to cut the corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 20.94 percent (instead of 20 percent) in order to make the entire \$2,000 credit fully refundable against payroll taxes, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page lashed out. The *Journal* accused Rubio and Lee of rhetoric that “apes the left’s class-war politics” and said the extra bit of corporate taxes would be “destructive.” The Rubio-Lee amendment “delivers checks to folks who owe no federal income tax. This is a disincentive to work and we would have thought

antithetical to conservative principles.” (The tax credit applied only to people who had jobs and owe payroll taxes, so it’s unclear how it could be a “disincentive to work.”) In the end, the Rubio-Lee amendment failed, but the final tax bill did set the corporate rate to 21 percent—in order to lower individual income taxes for high earners.

Rubio mentions the *Wall Street Journal*, the Cato Institute, and the Chamber of Commerce as traditional allies who haven’t been happy with him at times, but he says conservative politicians need to have the political “fortitude to admit that growth does not distribute the way it used to.”

“Fortitude means the ability to overcome whatever fears you have to do what’s right and also what’s just,” he says. “The worst that can happen for someone in politics if you do something unpopular is you lose an election. You don’t go to jail, you don’t go into exile—you lose an election.”

While Rubio’s support for paid family leave and a big child tax credit are consistent with his pre-Trump agenda, he acknowledges that his hawkishness on China has evolved in the Trump era. Asked if he’s trying to be more like Trump with his tweets and his rhetoric on China, Rubio says, “Obviously when I was on the campaign trail I tweeted a lot less, because I was busy campaigning, but I’ve always handled my own tweets. I don’t know if anything has changed in terms of the style.”

“I’ve always focused on China,” he adds. “The difference is my main focus in China for a long time was geopolitical and human rights. It remains that way, but . . . my geopolitics and human rights [concerns] . . . led me to economics.” Rubio says it was a mistake to grant China permanent normal trade relations, which the Senate did by an 83-15 vote in 2000, and admit the Communist country to the World Trade Organization. Beijing “assumed all of the benefits of the world international trading order but rejected all the responsibilities, and they did not become more democratic.”

At times, Rubio seems to echo the warnings that China hawks like Robert Kagan and William Kristol made in the pages of this magazine before China was admitted to the WTO. At others, he sounds more like paleoconservative populist Pat Buchanan.

How exactly does he plan to stop American companies from shipping jobs overseas? “Ultimately when it comes to China, there needs to be a cost, a penalty for doing it because China’s not just an economic competitor,” Rubio says. “They seek to supplant us, and they use their economy as a way to supplant us—not just economically, but militarily, technologically, and geopolitically. But as far as the rest of the world is concerned, I think what it means is that when a large multinational corporation is doing something that’s good for American workers, we help them, and when they’re not, we’re under no special obligation to bend over backwards because their mailing address has a U.S. zip code.”

It’s not quite clear how protectionist Rubio has become. Rubio still thinks the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which excluded China, would have been good as a matter of foreign policy and economics. “It was the economic equivalent of our military pivot to Asia” and would’ve opened up non-Chinese markets for American agriculture and industry, he says. “Unfortunately, both of

the presidential nominees were against TPP, and therefore that deal was dead.” As for Trump’s trade moves against European allies, Rubio simply objects to the timing: “I would have dealt with China first, together with the European Union in particular, and then I would have focused on the imbalance in that relationship [with European allies].”

At the beginning of the Trump administration, Utah’s Lee introduced a bill requiring congressional approval of any tariff increase, and in early June of this year Tennessee Republican Bob Corker introduced a narrower bill requiring congressional approval for raising tariffs on the basis of national security, as Trump did when he increased steel and aluminum tariffs on Canada, Mexico, and the European Union.

Following Rubio’s “new nationalism” speech on June 6, he said he hadn’t had a chance to look at the Corker bill, which had been introduced that day and was becoming the subject of much debate. On July 31 in his office, Rubio remained undecided on the measure. “I haven’t made up my mind on it. I have to think through what it means. I’m generally in favor of having the Congress having more authority,” he said, before expressing concern that “it weakens the nation’s hand in [trade] negotiations, because it sends a signal to these countries that they don’t have to compromise, because back home, we’re divided on it.”

What happened to the senator who promised in 2016 to stand up to Trump when necessary? Rubio contends he’s lived up to that promise. While he focuses on areas where he agrees with Trump, he has expressed disagreement with the president on a number of issues. Rubio says Trump should be “commended” for his efforts to achieve North Korean denuclearization, but he remains “very skeptical” Trump’s diplomacy will accomplish anything.

Rubio has been an outspoken defender of human rights, and when I ask him about Trump’s comments sanitizing North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un as a leader who “loves his people” and whose people love him with “great fervor,” he expresses polite disagreement: “I don’t agree with that assessment of him. My guess is that the president is not someone who has lived his entire life attending Council on Foreign Relations meetings and as a member of Congress, sitting through hearing after hearing, and taking [trips with congressional delegations] and meeting these folks. I think he expresses himself as someone who’s new to politics, which he is. It’s one of the reasons why he won. From the world of business, he probably feels that in order to reach a deal with someone, you’ve got to be nice to them. That opens them up. The reason I wouldn’t say those things is because I actually think it would demoralize those who are standing up to that regime.”

It’s not the fiery response you’d imagine from Rubio if a Democratic president had said the same words about Kim. But Rubio hasn’t become a total Trump sycophant. A member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Rubio says that Robert Mueller should be allowed to finish his job, and he rejects some of the right-wing attacks on the FBI. “I don’t think [the FBI] did anything wrong” in surveilling Carter Page, Rubio said on CNN on June 22. “There [were] a lot of reasons unrelated to the [Steele] dossier for why they wanted to look at Carter Page. And Carter Page was not a key member of the Trump campaign, and the Trump campaign has said that.” Rubio

has introduced a bill to automatically impose new sanctions on Russia if the director of national intelligence determines Russia is interfering in an American election.

But none of his current criticism of the president comes close to what Rubio was saying when he ran for president in 2016. He repeatedly said during that year's primaries that Trump was so mentally unstable he couldn't be trusted with the nuclear launch codes, and he stood by that assessment throughout the general election. Does he still view Trump that way? "Well, he's had the nuclear codes for a year and a half, and we've been all right," Rubio replies.

"So, look," he continues, "elections are a competition for power through peaceful means. It's better than war. In an election, you're in a competitive environment. You are running against another person, and you're going to do whatever you think it takes to win, and so is the other person. When it's all said and done, the president has on his cabinet Ben Carson, who was a competitor of his. He's appointed people that endorsed me, like Mike Pompeo and Nikki Haley. Elections end. What I always find funny about that question—not with you in particular, but when others ask it—is if he had been my opponent in a general election as a Democrat, everyone would be insisting that I leave the election behind and work with him. But somehow, a year and a half later, at least some, mostly on the left, insist that I continue to hold onto whatever happened in that campaign. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama said terrible things about each other in 2008. She ended up serving as his secretary of state for four years.

"So as far as my views of the president—he deserves credit for a lot. If you for a moment just erase the name Trump, take out all the Twitter and the daily noise, and just focus on what's happened over the last 18 months: ISIS has lost all its territory in the Middle East. All of our partners in the NATO alliance are looking for ways to contribute more. The U.S. is recommitted to NATO; in fact, continues to pour money—has given lethal military capacity to Ukraine the previous administration would not give. [We] ended the Iran deal. Moved the embassy to Jerusalem. Got a historic tax cut passed that has led to robust economic growth—one of the best quarters we've ever had, full employment on top of it. [Trump] has appointed one—soon two—conservatives to the U.S. Supreme Court and has slowly but surely, in 18 months, helped to remake the circuit courts, with 24 nominees today—close to one-eighth of all circuit court judges have been appointed by this president in a year and a half. If I told you a Republican president had done that, you would say, 'That's a pretty successful year and a half.' Unfortunately, it's overshadowed by the noise and stuff he puts out there."

Rubio's 2016 critique of Trump clearly indicated that, although a Clinton presidency would be even worse, he thought Trump lacked a basic mental and moral fitness to be president. We are now closer to the 2020 primaries than the 2016 election, and Republicans who still view Trump that way, like Arizona senator Jeff Flake, think Trump should face a primary challenger.

"Everyone has a right to do whatever they want," Rubio says of Flake's call for a primary challenge. "I could just say to you that in the modern era, every president that's been primaried has ended up losing the general election. George H. W. Bush. Johnson chose not to run. . . . Jimmy Carter. So I would say given that history, if you primaried the president, you are doing a

great service to whoever the Democratic nominee is, and many of these things that we've just spoken about would be unraveled and undone.”

Absent from Rubio's list of presidents was Gerald Ford, who was primaried by Ronald Reagan and lost a close race in 1976. Reagan believed there were important principles at stake that justified challenging Ford for the nomination, and it paid off for him in 1980. Eighteen months into the administration, Rubio plainly does not feel the same way about Donald Trump.

Where Rubio's rebranding will take him is unclear. At age 47, he's young enough that he could conceivably run for president again any time between 2024 and 2040. The political risk of cozying up to an unpopular president is that he could alienate a significant number of voters who backed him but not Trump in Florida. And too many rebrandings can kill a politician's brand. In 2008, Rubio endorsed evangelical favorite Mike Huckabee for president at the end of compassionate conservative George W. Bush's administration; he then rode a Tea Party wave to the Senate in 2010 and subsequently became the nation's leading advocate of comprehensive immigration reform after the Republican National Committee and the Republican donor class blamed the 2012 loss on Mitt Romney's hard-line immigration stance. As the past shows, Rubio's embrace of the nationalist label in 2018 tells us a lot about where the Republican party is at the moment but not necessarily where it, or he, will be a few years from now.