

Donald Trump's Foreign Policy: McCarthyism as a Cautionary Tale

The president-elect's foreign policy worldview is worryingly reminiscent of the most notorious right-wing populist in U.S. history.

By Jack Thompson

Donald Trump's shocking victory on November 8 has upended much of what the world thought it could expect from the United States over the next four years. Instead of the experienced and relatively predictable Hillary Clinton, world leaders will be confronted with a political neophyte who has failed to demonstrate an understanding of even the most basic elements of international politics. Therefore, one of the most pressing matters for observers of the U.S. is to consider what can be expected from the incoming Trump administration.

It is difficult to identify Trump's policy priorities because he continues to make conflicting statements and because his campaign platform was, in large part, radical and unrealistic. However, what we can do at this point is trace the chief elements of his worldview, which he has made no attempt to hide over the years. We can also explore some of the potential consequences of his approach to politics, by drawing comparisons with another right-wing populist who successfully exploited resentment of elites and fear of perceived foreign threats, and in doing so did lasting damage on American political culture: Joseph McCarthy. The striking parallels between the president-elect and this infamous demagogue should serve as a warning to those who believe that Trump will "normalize" once he takes the oath of office. If anything, the expectations of his core supporters – who are profoundly distrustful of the political

establishment and who are demanding radical solutions – will reinforce the businessman's commitment to extremist right-wing populism. The result could be a period in American history even more damaging than McCarthyism.

Foreign Policy as Domestic Politics

Thomas Wright, in the first lengthy analysis of Trump's worldview, writes that the President-elect "has thought long and hard about America's global role." In developing this argument, Wright attributes to Trump more in the way of considered thought than is warranted (though, to be fair, Wright's piece was written in early 2016, before

KEY POINTS

- In order to understand Donald Trump's foreign policy we should consider the legacy of Senator Joseph McCarthy, the infamous right-wing anti-communist
- Like McCarthy, Trump has built a base of working-class white support with a message that combines populist criticism of elites with exaggerated depictions of foreign threats
- Trump's populist rhetoric does not offer a coherent set of ideas for U.S. foreign policy and is not designed to – its primary purpose is to energize his supporters and demonize his opponents
- This means that Trump is unlikely to "normalize" once in office, as he will need this base to support his reelection in 2020

most people took Trump seriously). Certainly, as Wright astutely notes, Trump has a history of critiquing, albeit in a superficial manner, the liberal international order that the United States has promoted since the 1940s. Trump has, from time to time, complained that the U.S. does not get its money's worth from its security alliances around the world – that its allies have been, in effect, taking advantage of Uncle Sam – and that the globalized economy is not working as well as it could for Americans.

To call this a “remarkably coherent and consistent” foreign policy worldview, however, as Wright does, is problematic.¹ The transcripts from lengthy interviews Trump gave to the *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, for instance, reveal that he has given virtually no thought to the most pressing problems in world affairs, let alone how they might be solved. His inability to discuss the subject in even moderately coherent terms is troubling. Instead of mastering the details, or even the chief elements, of the issues his contention is that he will, through sheer force of his personality and business acumen, negotiate better “deals” with other countries. This approach will, to put it diplomatically, encounter obstacles when he begins to interact with his foreign counterparts.

Instead of identifying a systematic worldview where one does not exist, a more useful way of conceptualizing Trump's approach is to think of foreign policy as little more than an extension of his political agenda. Or, to put it crudely, Trump doesn't care about real-world implications; what he cares about are votes. More specifically, he has used criticism of the liberal international order to build the base of his political support. Once we understand this crucial aspect of Trumpism – which combines populist rhetoric about the downsides of the globalized economy with overtly racist appeals to white nationalism and a vague promise to “Make America Great Again” – the sheer implausibility of his platform begins to make a bit more sense. It appeals to a specific, disaffected cohort that he has been cultivating since the day he announced his candidacy for president: working-class whites. In fact, it is clear that Trump's high-profile embrace of birtherism in 2011 and 2012 – in which he endorsed the conspiracy theory that Barack Obama is not an American citizen and is therefore ineligible to be president – was a trial run for the type of campaign he ran in 2016.

Trump earned the support of two-thirds of whites without a college degree voters on Election Day. According to exit polling data, Trump won nearly two-thirds of the votes from those for whom immigration was the most important issue as well as from those who viewed international trade as a threat to American jobs. (It is no accident that he launched his campaign with a speech in



Senator Joseph McCarthy. *Library of Congress*

which he called Mexican immigrants rapists.) He also won 57 percent of the vote from voters most concerned about terrorism.² In effect, Trump has created a near-perfect message for white voters without a college degree who are, not without reason, disenchanted with the state of mainstream politics. That this voting bloc constitutes more than forty percent of the electorate gives it the power to potentially determine elections. However, recent Republican presidential candidates, such as Mitt Romney, struggled to appeal to these voters in the industrial Midwest which meant that the working-class white vote splintered. The genius of Trump's campaign was his ability to craft a message that cohered it into a solid voting bloc.

McCarthy Instead of Taft

In his analysis of Trump, Wright argues that Trump's rhetoric is reminiscent of Robert Taft, who was a frequent contender for the Republican presidential nomination in the 1940s and early 1950s and who was skeptical of the aggressive internationalism that was emerging as the leitmotif of U.S. foreign policy. Though there are echoes of pre-Cold War conservative nationalism in Trump's criticism of the liberal international order, the Republican Senator from Ohio is a poor guide to the president-elect's worldview. Taft was a cautious, principled man whose vision for a nationalist foreign policy – whatever its shortcomings – dovetailed with his lifelong commitment to advancing conservative principles at home and to restraining what he saw as the executive overreach of Democratic presidents. He also envisioned an important role for international law, an area in which Trump has not indicated the slightest interest.

Instead of looking to Taft for insight, we should look at another politician who rose to prominence during the early Cold War era – Joseph McCarthy. The Republican

Senator from Wisconsin identified an issue of paramount importance to the United States – the threat posed by the the Soviet Union – and used it to attack his political opponents, with considerable success, for several years. But McCarthy harbored no deep convictions about the Soviet Union; he focused on it because anti-communism appealed to his base of working-class Irish-Americans. McCarthy's crusade had little to do with the enormously complicated task of opposing Soviet expansion overseas. The policy of containment, in contrast, though not without flaws, at least provided a blueprint for doing just that.

Instead, McCarthy's version of anti-communism was designed to harness an anti-elitist message in order to excite his base and attack his opponents. That is why he blamed what he characterized as the fecklessness and even treachery of Eastern elites in the foreign policy establishment – “the bright young men who are born with silver spoons in their mouths,” he called them with disdain – for allowing communist subversion to take hold. It helped that McCarthy was not particularly principled; in fact, he was politically promiscuous. He changed parties – he was a former Democrat – and positions when convenient. To be sure, McCarthy alone did not create the anti-communist hysteria that swept the U.S. and he was hardly the only politician to take advantage of the political opportunities it created. However, for a few years, he was the most visible right-wing populist in the movement and is rightly remembered as its most consequential advocate.

Does any of this sound familiar? Trump has identified a pressing challenge – the fact that the political system has failed many Americans – and constructed a potent populist narrative around it: that the elitist globalists are to blame (just as McCarthy targeted the alleged communists and their sympathizers). “For those who control the levers of power in Washington, and for the global special interests, they partner with these people that don't have your good in mind,” he argued in a speech in October. “It's a global power structure that is responsible for the economic decisions that have robbed our working class, stripped our country of its wealth and put that money into the pockets of a handful of large corporations and political entities.”

Like McCarthy, Trump appears to have few political convictions and changes positions often depending upon the context. When it comes to immigration, for instance, one of his signature issues, during the campaign Trump promised to deport 2 to 3 million undocumented workers immediately upon taking office. However, as recently as 2012 he opposed deporting unauthorized immigrants. He

has equivocated on other campaign trail promises as well. In fact, Trump has changed his political affiliation several times, from Republican to independent to Democrat and then back to Republican. He has also donated significant amounts of money to candidates in both parties. Trump and McCarthy even have a significant personal connection in the form of Roy Cohn, who was the Republican Senator's chief advisor and later became Trump's lawyer and friend.

Effective Politics, but Terrible Statecraft

Of course, there is one key difference between the president-elect and McCarthy: Trump's narrative made him president, whereas the Senator, after a few years in the spotlight, was censured by the Senate and died in disgrace a few years later. (Though it should be noted that McCarthy never renounced his crusade.) Trump built his campaign on anti-free trade, anti-immigrant, anti-internationalist rhetoric because it proved to be wildly popular with working-class whites and at least non-objectionable to most Republican voters (ninety percent of whom supported him). But his success should not obscure the fact that powerful populist messages, when they are disconnected from a coherent political program, make for poor policy.

McCarthyism, for instance, did nothing to address the Soviet threat abroad and made it more difficult to devise a constructive response to actual, as opposed to imagined, espionage at home. To make matters worse, it inflicted considerable damage on the nation's political culture. It ruined reputations and careers across the coun-

FURTHER READING

The Populist Persuasion: an American History *Michael Kazin, Basic Books, 1995*

This is the best book on the history of political populism in the United States. It includes a short but astute analysis of McCarthy's skill in harnessing right-wing populist anger.

The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality *Justin Gest, Oxford University Press, 2016*

This is perhaps the best effort yet to explain why working class whites are so angry and how their profound disaffection is manifesting itself politically.

Republican Party Foreign Policy: 2016 and Beyond *Colin Dueck, Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 22, 2016*

This essay, by one of the leading students of conservative foreign policy, examines the various strands of thought in today's Republican Party about international affairs. Written before the general election, it offers a pessimistic assessment of the future of the GOP's foreign policy should Trump win.

try and infected American public life with an undercurrent of hysteria that took years to dissipate. It also distorted Republican politics. Richard Nixon used anti-communism to enhance his public profile and to secure the Vice Presidential nomination alongside Dwight Eisenhower in 1952. Eisenhower, though privately disgusted by McCarthy's methods, hesitated to confront him because of the fervor that propelled the Senator's campaign.

McCarthyism also provided the backdrop against which Republicans, led by John Foster Dulles during the 1952 presidential campaign, emphasized the notion of the "liberation" of captive peoples in Eastern Europe. On the campaign trail, "rollback" proved to be an effective contrast with the more cautious doctrine of containment that was associated with the Democratic Truman administration. However, it also sent mixed messages to those trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Once in office, Eisenhower and Dulles privately concluded that directly confronting the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe with military force would be ineffective and they focused on propaganda efforts. In fact, "rollback" aside, their conduct of foreign policy was in many respects sensible, according to many historians. But most Eastern Europeans, understandably, did not discern the difference between campaign rhetoric and actual policy. When an uprising against Soviet domination occurred in Hungary in 1956, many of the insurgents believed that the United States would come to their aid. It did not and several thousand Hungarians died in the fighting.

McCarthyism, especially the accusation that the Truman administration had "lost" China to the communists, also affected Democratic politics. Figures such as John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson concluded that they would need to be at least as hawkish as their Republican opponents in order to avoid being labeled "soft" on communism, an attitude that would make the challenges posed by the Vietnam conflict all the more complicated.

Trumpism and U.S. Foreign Policy

McCarthy's version of anticommunism was a disaster for the United States. It is too soon to conclude definitively that Trump's foreign policy will suffer a similar fate. However, the parallels between McCarthyism and Trumpism should give us pause. Just like McCarthy,

Trump has used what are ostensibly foreign policy issues – he argued in August that Obama is the "founder of ISIS" – to score domestic political points against his opponents. Also like McCarthy, Trump has an uncanny ability to mobilize the darkest instincts in American political culture. His demonization of minority groups such as Muslims and Latinos has introduced a level of fear among these communities that has not been seen in some time. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks extremism, hate crimes have markedly increased in frequency since the election.³

McCarthy's lack of any strategic blueprint for defeating communism looks an awful lot like Trump's policy vis-à-vis China. His unvarnished hostility toward the world's only other superpower – which he attacked harshly and repeatedly during the campaign and which he is now in the process of antagonizing in connection with its relationship with Taiwan – has baffled experts and further heightened tensions in an already nervous East Asia. It has also increased fears that he has no long-term foreign policy strategy in mind, that he only knows how to issue provocative statements designed to dominate newspaper headlines and reassure his most passionate supporters that he will shake things up in Washington, D.C. It is an approach that Joseph McCarthy would have understood all too well.

SELECTED SOURCES

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3. Alexis Okeowo, "Hate on the Rise After Trump's Election," *The New Yorker*, November 17, 2016. <http://www.newyorker>

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