



Why the World Shouldn't Panic About Trump

By Joe Macaron
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“Everything I say right now is a suggestion, I am not the President,” the Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump told Fox News¹ on May 13. However, his earlier proposals to build a wall along the border with Mexico or to impose a ban on Muslims entering the United States are making world leaders more anxious about the upcoming election results than any other presidential vote in recent memory.

British Prime Minister David Cameron called one of Trump's remarks “divisive, stupid and wrong”² and Chinese finance minister Lou Jiwei described him as an “irrational type.”³ The German newspaper *Der Spiegel* labelled him “America's agitator” and “the world's most dangerous man.”⁴ Most foreign leaders are perplexed by one the most unorthodox presidential candidates in modern US history and are uncertain whether Trump's rhetoric actually mirrors his potential presidency. The expectation, that Trump's candidacy will fade as quickly as it soared up, is no longer valid. He is now one step away from the Oval Office and starting this summer will receive intelligence briefings about the state of the world.

In the past eight years, mostly after the Presidency of George W. Bush, an anti-establishment trend began among US voters distressed by the war in Iraq and the sustained economic recession. Being a politician in Washington became a fizzling brand. On the Democratic side, a fresh face like Senator Barack Obama was more appealing in 2008 than the establishment candidate Hillary Clinton. The Tea Party movement in 2009 brought a new generation of leaders to the US Congress, challenging a Republican establishment that has been gradually losing control of the GOP. The Trump phenomenon is the culmination of this trend and hence should come as no surprise, however his anti-establishment platform has been unprecedented, in particular if compared to previous presidential candidates.

When candidate George W. Bush unveiled his nuclear policy initiative in May 2000, he surrounded himself with the heavy weights of the Republican establishment like Henry Kissinger and Colin Powell to prove he has enough intellectual stamina to lead on national security. In contrast, Trump's major foreign policy speech at the Center for National Interest on April 27 was a solo act, earning him low marks from the attendance, including Russian Ambassador to Washington Sergey Kislyak. If we are to judge Trump on his current team of national security experts⁵, there is indeed a cause for concern.

Most importantly, the challenge in decoding Trump is that he has no coherent foreign policy narrative. We cannot simply claim to know with confidence where he stands on the global challenges facing Washington. However, the same can be said about previous candidates who eventually made it to the White House. In a presidential debate in 2000, George W. Bush said that “if we do not stop extending our troops all around the world in nation-building missions, then we are going to have a serious problem coming down the road, and I am going to prevent that.” He ended up being a convert to nation-building missions. When candidate Bill Clinton ran for President in 1992, he said that President George H. W. Bush “coddled the butchers of Beijing”⁶ blasting this rapprochement with the Chinese government after the massacre at Tiananmen Square. In 1998, President Clinton participated in a welcoming ceremony in that same square.



Trump parallel in US history

Trump is not the first US celebrity or businessman to advance through the ranks in national politics. President Ronald Reagan, once a Hollywood star, became an icon of the Republican Party, even though he went through a transitional period serving as a governor of California. US presidential historians like Michael Beschloss⁷ are drawing comparison between Trump and businessman Wendell Willkie, the Republican presidential candidate who ran in 1940 against President Franklin Roosevelt. The dominant challenge of that time was Nazi Germany and World War II compared to today's challenge of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Willkie's rise in national polls and his anti-war platform made European allies anxious, yet he was an opportunist who tapped into the American public's fear of becoming entangled in another world war while boasting that he personally covered the cost of his election campaign.

Those similarities with Trump extend to foreign policy as well. In his acceptance speech for the Republican presidential nomination, Willkie noted that the Germans "crushed France like an eggshell. The reason is now clear: the fault lay with France itself."⁸ It is safe to arguably say that if there were social media and around the clock television coverage in the 1940s, Willkie's remarks and opportunism could have dominated the news cycle versus an ailing Roosevelt running for a third term. Faulting Europeans remains a popular theme in American politics. In January 2015, Trump linked the Paris attacks to the fact that France is "one of the toughest gun control countries in the world"⁹ and described Brussels as "a hellhole."¹⁰

Willkie and Trump embody the worst-case scenario the "Founding Fathers" of the United States had in mind; "the demagogues" coming to power. When conceived, the American political system was meant to be a republic, not necessarily a democracy. The greatest fear was that a majority would contribute to turning the country into a tyranny, hence governance was meant to be for the elite or in the terms of today's world, the establishment. During the debates of the Federal Convention of 1787, the convention that crafted the US Constitution, Alexander Hamilton and Elbridge Gerry cautioned that "demagogues are the great pests of our government,"¹¹ arguing that the term limit of governance should be four years to mitigate the risks of having demagogues in power. Therefore, the crucial question the US and the world will ask in the coming months is: What if Trump really becomes president?

What to expect from a Trump presidency?

When asked on MSNBC where he gets his advice on foreign policy, Trump replied, "I am speaking with myself, number one, because I have a very good brain. ... So I know what I'm doing."¹² There are many indications, indeed, that Trump will likely be a loner president like President John Adams was in the 19th century. While he was prequalified to become President compared to Trump, Adams had a difficult character and was disliked even by his own cabinet. He ended up being a one term President. Trump's Administration might reflect the current divisiveness of his campaign team, between the hardcore loyalists who would do anything for their candidate and the centrist camp that wants to appeal to the mainstream of the Republican Party. If Trump does not adapt to the rules of engagement in US politics, his presidency will likely be marred by deadlock and an inward outlook instead of focusing on global challenges.

An awkward silence will fill the White House's Situation Room if and when President Trump is told that befriending President Vladimir Putin might not be feasible in light of the secret US wars with Russia and that Japan has no interest whatsoever in his offer to turn nuclear. Even Trump's basic signature campaign promises must eventually pass the reality check of governance. The US system does not have the capacity to unanimously build a wall on 1,000 miles of the border with Mexico at a cost of \$8 billion.¹³ The estimated cost of that wall is significantly higher and the US cannot utilize the nearly \$54 billion trade deficit with



Mexico to fund it like Trump is claiming. President Trump will also realize how painstaking it would be to convince the US Congress to allocate a budget for that wall. Furthermore, the decision to ban Muslims from entering the US is nearly impossible to get through American bureaucracy. Moreover, the repercussions on the US domestic politics are insurmountable, in particular inside the Republican Party. Before even becoming President, Trump already backtracked on his views of Israel, torture, and banning Muslims. His campaign style has been to assign outrageous statements to random topics in order to capture media attention. Like any demagogue, his motivation is polling not policy.

What is alarming about Trump though is not merely his unconventional proposals but his unpredictability. So far, his campaign rhetoric portrays a non-interventionist who might emulate previous anti-multilateralism traditions of American presidents. However, the outlines of his foreign policy, as conveyed in his speech at the Center for the National Interest,¹⁴ are not drastically different from the current approach of President Barack Obama. Trump spoke about a non-ideological policy, about peace and prosperity in the world not war and destruction. Furthermore, they share similar views on the concept of “free riders” in reference to key US allies as described by Obama in his *Atlantic* magazine interview;¹⁵ they both dislike neocons and believe America should not be the policeman of the world.

Trump is incapable of radically changing the US system or drastically altering the nature of US relations with key allies around the world. He might change the style of the presidency or make the White House’s Lincoln room fancier, but at the end of the day, like every president before him, he has to deal with day to day mundane policymaking: an increasingly divided Congress where no legislation can easily pass and a complex US bureaucracy increasingly divided on most global challenges.

¹ Gabrielle Levy. “Trump: “Everything is a suggestion.” *U.S. News and World Report*. May 13, 2016.

<http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-05-13/trump-everything-is-a-suggestion>

² Matt Chorley. Donald Trump is “divisive, stupid and wrong” but we shouldn’t ban him from Britain, says David Cameron. *Daily Mail*. December 16, 2015. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3362449/Donald-Trump-divisive-stupid-wrong-shouldn-t-ban-Britain-says-David-Cameron.html>

³ David Smith and Julian Borger. “President Trump fill world leaders with fear.” *The Guardian*. April 28, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/28/donald-trump-president-world-leaders-foreign-relations>

⁴ Markus Feldenkirchen, Veit Medick, and Holger Stark. “America’s Agitator.” *Der Spiegel*. February 1, 2016.

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/donald-trump-is-the-most-dangerous-man-in-the-world-a-1075060.html>

⁵ Jeremy Diamond and Nicole Gaolette. “Donald Trump Unveils foreign policy advisers.” *CNN*. March 21, 2016.

<http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/21/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy-team/>

⁶ Peter Baker. “Bush, Clinton and China.” *Washington Post*. April 8, 2008. <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/04/bush-clinton-and-china.html>

⁷ Michael Beschloss. “Before Trump or Fiorina, there was Wendell Willkie.” *New York Times*. August 29, 2015.

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/upshot/before-trump-or-fiorina-there-was-wendell-willkie.html?_r=0

⁸ Wendell Willkie. “Address accepting the presidential nomination in Elwood, Indiana.” August 17, 1940.

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=75629>

⁹ Jeremy Diamond. “Trump: Paris massacre would have been “much different” if people had guns.” *CNN*. November 14, 2015.

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/14/politics/paris-terror-attacks-donald-trump-guns/>

¹⁰ Cynthia Kroet. “Donald Trump: Brussels is like a hellhole.” *Politico*. January 27, 2016. <http://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-brussels-is-like-a-hellhole/>

¹¹ Robert Yates. Notes of the Secret debates of the Federal Convention of 1787. *The Avalon Project*. May 30, 1787.

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/yates.asp

¹² Miles E. Johnson. “Trump on his foreign policy advisers: I’m speaking with myself.” *Mother Jones*. March 16, 2016.

<http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2016/03/trump-foreign-policy-advisers-speaking-with-myself>

¹³ Glenn Kessler. “Trump’s dubious that his border wall would cost \$8 billion.” *The Washington Post*. February 11, 2016.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2016/02/11/trumps-dubious-claim-that-his-border-wall-would-cost-8-billion/>

¹⁴ “Trump on Foreign Policy.” *The National Interest*. April 27, 2016. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-foreign-policy-15960>

¹⁵ Jeffrey Goldberg. “The Obama Doctrine.” *The Atlantic*. March 10, 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/personal/archive/2016/03/the-obama-doctrine-the-atlantics-exclusive-report-on-presidents-hardest-foreign-policy-decisions/473151/>