



Trump's Convention Speech and the Rise of Conservative Nationalism

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Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump is the first American politician in modern history to invoke both nationalism and populism in a successful bid to lead one of the two major US political parties in the race to the White House. The conservative and anti-globalization rhetoric of his speech at the conclusion of the GOP convention in Cleveland, Ohio last week marked a significant shift not only in the message of the Republican party but also the US outlook to the world.

It will take a while for both Republicans and conservatives to digest the impact of the July 21 [speech](#) that came as a contrast to the core of some of their basic principles. Trump called upon Americans not to trust in God or themselves to address the country's national challenges, like most Republican candidates in modern history did, but to believe in the capabilities of the nominee himself. "Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why alone I can fix it," he proclaimed.

Trump is revisiting an American nationalism defined by the premise of cultural unity. However, nativist nationalism that is built on the rationale of ethnic background has been part of the American discourse since the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Founding Father leaders such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were concerned early on about immigrants coming from foreign countries with absolute monarchies. The September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States led to the rise in military enlistment while the US economic recession in 2008 and the wave of terrorist attacks since 2014 have been inspiring anti-globalization sentiments among Americans. Trump embodies a new form of US conservatism focused on national interests, ethnic identity, social conservatism, law and order, and immigration.

Indeed, the Republican nominee's convention speech had three guiding principles: restoring security at home and abroad, ending illegal immigration, and challenging multilateral free trade agreements. Not only the concept of limited government was partially shattered in his speech, the Republican party under Trump is seemingly no longer the bastion of free markets and empowering individuals to solve problems, however he maintained the Republican beliefs in having a strong national defense, appointing conservative judges on the Supreme Court, and protecting the individual right of US citizens to bear arms.

After depicting a gloomy picture of a country devastated by violence against police and terrorist attacks, Trump promised Americans that “safety will be restored” on January 20, 2017 as soon as he is sworn in as President, calling himself “the law and order candidate.” He also warned that 180,000 illegal immigrants with criminal records are roaming the streets of the United States, reiterating that as President he will “build a great border wall [with Mexico] to stop illegal immigration, to stop the gangs and the violence, and to stop the drugs from pouring into our communities.” His anti-immigration speech, including on Syrian refugees, comes as no surprise and coincides with similar sentiments rising across Europe. Indeed, some European right wing politicians attended the Republican convention in Cleveland, including the Brexit champion and leader of the anti-immigration UK Independence Party Nigel Farage and Dutch leader of the Party for Freedom Geert Wilders.

Trump also has a minority challenge in the national elections. According to the Washington Post, only 18 of the 2,472 delegates in Cleveland were African Americans, the lowest in the history of Republican conventions. Trump’s very low support among Black and Hispanic voters is likely a reflection of his strong condemnation of violence against police while ignoring the killing of African Americans by law enforcement officials as well as his anti-immigration stances, a major issue for Hispanic voters.

The populism theme focused on how “big business, elite media and major donors” are backing the Clinton campaign. “She is their puppet, and they pull the strings,” he added. Trump described how “unfair trade deals” led to laying off factory workers and noted that he wants to be the voice of those “who cannot defend themselves,” a message that signals a new tone for Republicans on labor issues. He sees challenging free trade agreements as a common cause with the supporters of the Democratic Candidate Senator Bernie Sanders on the left spectrum of American politics. However, Sanders, who recently endorsed Clinton, posted on Facebook July 21: “those who voted for me will not support Trump.”

The Republican nominee did not shy away from labelling his “credo” as “America First” against the globalization platform of Hillary Clinton. He talked about three national security priorities: safe neighborhoods, secure borders and protection from terrorism. While addressing the safety of neighborhoods is not within the mandate of the federal government, Trump did not spell out how he will practically protect the nation from terrorism. Yet, he offered a three-point plan to defeat ISIL

similar to President Barack Obama's approach: gathering the best intelligence, abandoning nation building and regime change, and working with US allies, mainly Israel.

On foreign policy, Trump largely focused on the Middle East and what he called the "international humiliation" of Washington abroad. According to one campaign staffer we talked to, each foreign policy adviser was asked to suggest five incidents in which the US was humiliated under Obama, and three of those made it ultimately to the final version of Trump's speech: 1) images of US sailors "forced to their knees" while detained in Iran September 2015; 2) the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi in September 2012; and 3) President Obama's August 2012 redline on using chemical weapons by Syrian President Bashar Assad that was skirted by Washington.

Furthermore, Trump blamed his Democratic opponent for supporting Islamists in Egypt, the chaos in Libya and Syria, the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and the empowerment of Iran. He noted that Hillary Clinton's legacy as Secretary of State, between January 2009 and January 2013, was all about "death, destruction, terrorism and weakness." While it is true that Clinton strongly backed the US decision to intervene in Libya, for better or worse she has advised the White House to maintain the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt for a transitional period. However, the four-day the Republican Convention July 18-21 was all about a public prosecution to demonize Hillary Clinton and target her credibility. This tactic was not only meant to galvanize the base to rally behind Trump, but also to make it difficult and politically costly for additional Republicans to continue crossing over and committing to vote for the Democratic nominee.

Trump's only foreign policy controversy during the convention was his hint during a New York Times [interview](#) that Washington should not automatically come to the defense of NATO allies unless those countries have paid their dues to the transatlantic alliance. This suggested US retreat from unconditional defense guarantees, driven by financial concerns, was a trademark of former Republican President Richard Nixon's doctrine in the early 1970s. Leading congressional leaders on the Republican side condemned this statement on NATO, including Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell and conservative Senator Tom Cotton.

On the recent military coup attempt in Turkey, Trump offered in his July 21 [interview](#) a different tone from the Obama administration, speaking warmly about Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, however while offering the same policy approach of the Obama administration. The Republican

nominee said that Ankara “can do a lot” more against ISIL, while noting that he is “a big fan of Kurdish forces” and hoping these forces can work together with Ankara. Trump also agreed with Obama that the US should get rid of ISIL before getting rid of Syrian President Bashar Assad. Interestingly enough, he stated that when civil liberties in the world are concerned Washington is “not a very good messenger” for Turkey and other countries especially in light of the unrest across the United States. This is yet another dramatic shift in Republican rhetoric compared to the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003 under President George W. Bush’s administration.

The takeaway from Cleveland is that Trump is no longer a mere phenomenon, he is officially now one step away from the Oval Office and will soon begin to receive intelligence briefings on the state of the world. The Republican nominee’s views on foreign affairs should be taken seriously and watched closely at home and abroad during the next three months leading to election day on November 8, 2016. While offering tough talk on domestic and foreign issues, most of his domestic promises do not fall within the mandate of the federal government and his foreign policy views offer no tangible change of course from the Obama administration. Most of all, Trump seems willing to tap into the fears of Americans and his lasting impact on US politics should not be underestimated.