

The Trump Phenomenon and American Isolationism

– the Strange Nature of the 2016 Presidential Campaign

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Résumé

Den egendomliga valkampanjen i USA år 2016 har visat hur amerikaner, liksom även européer, söker efter radikala förändringar. Både republikanernas Donald Trump och demokraternas Bernard Sanders utnyttjar var och en på sitt sätt det missnöje som många i den amerikanska arbetar- och medelklassen känner med bristen på den ekonomiska och politiska frihet de en gång kunde åtnjuta. Dessa två politiker – och i viss mån även republikanen Ted Cruz och demokraten Hillary Clinton – ger uttryck för den frustration den amerikanska väljarkåren upplever. Detta gäller också stora grupper som t ex afro-amerikaner, spansktalande, mexikanare och muslimer. Författaren ser allvarligt på både Trumps och Sanders stöd för ekonomisk protektionism som kan påverka bl a USAs handelsavtal med Europa och Asien – inslag i en politik som kan förändra relationerna med Kina och med allierade länder som Japan och Sydkorea. Trump vill t o m omvärdera förhållandet till just alliansländer och även till Nato. Författaren avslutar sin artikel med att uttrycka att USA och dess allierade och vänner har alla skäl att vara oroliga för vilken väg Washington kan komma att slå in på under de närmaste åren.

DONALD TRUMP MAY or may not win the Republican nomination for President of the United States, and if he does, he may or may not be elected President. In one sense, it does not matter. The weird American election campaign of 2016 has already demonstrated that Americans, like their counterparts in much of Europe, are reaching beyond conventional parties and politicians in search of radical change. A significant percentage of voters on both sides of the Atlantic feel let down by self-styled elites who, in their view, have governed with a studied indifference to the needs, concerns and fears of ordinary people.

Not unlike Marie Le Pen, Jeremy Corbyn, Beppe Grillo and others, both Trump, the former Democrat who now calls himself a

Republican, and his counterpart, Senator Bernard Sanders, the maverick socialist who now calls himself a Democrat, are appealing in their different ways to voters who feel that the twenty-first century has left them behind. These voters have little loyalty to conventional political parties, who, they feel, are unable to afford them the economic and personal security that they once enjoyed. Moreover, they feel betrayed by their governments – for most Europeans, by the Eurocrats as well – who they feel get very little done, and are at best indifferent to their needs and aspirations.

Europe's financial crisis has hit ordinary citizens very hard. They feel doubly undone by the Schengen agreements, that were incorporated into the 1999 Amsterdam Treaty,

and which permit, indeed foster, the free movement of labor throughout the European Union, thereby reducing the number of jobs that might otherwise be available to native residents of the more prosperous states. In addition, many ordinary Europeans, and indeed, an ever larger number of politicians and governments, view the massive influx of new migrants from the Middle East not only as yet another potential source of competition for jobs, but as a drain on already overstretched public expenditures. Finally, many Europeans have developed an increasingly strong bias against multiculturalism, which they feel has eroded the traditional values upon which their nation-states have been erected.

Middle and working class American voters likewise have not seen their fortunes improve since the Great Recession of 2008. Those voters, especially, but not solely working class white males, worry about their personal and economic security.¹ Although the unemployment rate has dropped by several percentage points since 2008, working class Americans often take lower paying jobs or part-time jobs to get by, while middle class Americans have seen their incomes stagnate over the past decade. What has been difficult for whites has been even more distressing for African and Hispanic Americans. Minority households' median income fell 9 percent between 2010 and 2013, compared to a drop of only 1 percent for whites. Black Americans in particular remained hard hit: whereas the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for whites dropped to 4.3 percent in February 2016; the equivalent rate for Black Americans was more than twice as high, at 8.8 per cent.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the vast majority of Americans reflect the same bitterness and anger that has given rise to extreme right- and left-wing demagogues

and parties in Europe. They resent the top one percent of Americans whose incomes have risen sharply during the same period that their own incomes have barely risen at all. As is the case in Europe, many white working class Americans, especially males, resent the multiculturalism that has become an article of faith on the part of governing classes; in America the more commonly used term for multiculturalism is the derisive term "political correctness." White working and middle class Americans are deeply concerned about a breakdown in law-and-order, exemplified by what they perceive as an increasing bias on the part of the government against police and law enforcement officials. Finally, like their European counterparts, a significant percentage of Americans worry that the influx of illegal immigrants into their country not only is changing the nature of American society in a manner that endangers their values, but also is undermining their own immediate and longer-term prospects for employment and economic well-being.

The alienation of ordinary citizens, both in Europe and America, harks back to earlier, uglier eras, when demagogues, racists and rabble rousers were able to harness people's anger to attain political power. While it would be far-fetched to compare today's so-called "outsiders" to Hitler or Mussolini, although Trump has voiced his admiration for the latter, they are reminiscent of late nineteenth century politicians such as the notoriously anti-Semitic Mayor of Vienna Karl Lueger, or the American "Know Nothing" party of the 1840s and 1850s. The latter opposed the entry of Irish and German Roman Catholic immigrants who, it alleged, owed their allegiance to the Pope and would therefore undermine republican values.

Hostility to immigrants and economic protectionism

Immigration, and anti-foreign sentiment generally, probably is foremost on the minds of Trump supporters, as it is for their European counterparts. In Europe, it is the flood of Muslims, notably Arabs, from war torn parts of the Middle East that draw long-suppressed racial (and religious) resentments; in America, it is the unceasing flow of migrants from Mexico and Central America that many Americans perceive as a threat to their way of life. When Donald Trump promises to build a wall along the American border with Mexico, and have the Mexicans pay for it, he not only plays to the fantasies of Americans, but also to those of Europeans, who wish geography would afford them the opportunity to do the same. Indeed, to some extent that is exactly what is taking place in Europe, with Middle Eastern migrants increasingly being quarantined in Turkey.

Both Trump and Sanders are capitalizing upon the sense of many in the American working class, and to some extent the middle class, who feel left behind by the changing economic structures of the twenty-first century. Their proposed solutions are radically different, however. Trump calls for severe cutbacks in the size of a government that he asserts is incapable of doing anything constructive; his favorite whipping boy is the Environmental Protection Agency, which he asserts he will close down. Sanders takes the polar opposite approach. He would expand the government's role even further, because it does far too little for the average citizen.

What both men have in common, however, is their support for economic protectionism. Both would jettison the Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership (TTP) and drop negotiations for a Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment

Partnership (TTIP). Both would eliminate the Export-Import Bank, which finances American trade through export credits.

Trump has called the TTP “a horrible deal. It is a deal that is going to lead to nothing but trouble. It’s a deal that was designed for China to come in, as they always do, through the back door and totally take advantage of everyone...This is one of the worst trade deals...We’re losing now over \$500 billion in terms of imbalance with China, \$75 billion a year imbalance with Japan...”² He promises that “on day one of the Trump administration the U.S. Treasury Department will designate China as a currency manipulator. This will begin a process that imposes appropriate countervailing duties on artificially cheap Chinese products.”³

Trump calls the Ex-Im Bank's operations “featherbedding.” He believes that the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) should never have come into being. He would impose a 35 per cent. tax on car parts and products crossing the Mexican border—in violation of NAFTA, and a 20 per cent tax on all imported goods, in violation of World Trade Organization rules and a host of trade agreements stretching back to the original 1948 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

Sanders, self-proclaimed protector of union workers, offers a trade platform in words almost identical to those of Trump. He claims that trade with China has lost the United States three million jobs. He proudly proclaims that he voted against NAFTA, CAFTA (the Central American Free Trade Agreement), and permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) with China. He argues that these agreements have been “a disaster for the American worker.”⁴ As for the Ex-Im Bank, Sanders has supported conservative Republicans who wish to defund it. As he

put it after voting against funding the Bank in June 2015, “at a time when almost every major corporation in this country has shut down plants and outsourced millions of American jobs, we should not be providing corporate welfare to multi-national corporations through the Export-Import Bank.”⁵

In their common opposition not only to free trade, but to the support of any business being done abroad, Trump and Sanders are doing far more than putatively protecting American workers. They are also playing to a long-standing isolationist streak in American politics that has grown stronger in the aftermath of the fiasco in Iraq.

It should be noted that while Hillary Clinton is no isolationist, she too has voiced her opposition to TTP. Clinton was once a supporter of TTP, and more generally of free trade. She had supported her husband’s successful effort to win Congressional approval of NAFTA in 1994; two years later she stated “I think everybody is in favor of free and fair trade. I think NAFTA is proving its worth.”⁶ Indeed, as late as 2004, as Senator from New York, she asserted that “I think, on balance, NAFTA has been good for New York state and America.”⁷

A year later, however, Clinton voted against the CAFTA agreement, and in 2007 she made it clear that she was no longer supported NAFTA either, opining that “NAFTA was a mistake to the extent that it did not deliver on what we had hoped it would.”⁸ Clinton could therefore argue that her support for TTP was more of an aberration than her current opposition to the agreement. On the other hand, as late as 2012, when asked by an audience in India why Barack Obama was attacking Mitt Romney, his rival for the presidency, for supporting outsourcing, then-Secretary of State Clinton merely replied “Well, you know, it’s an election campaign.

Outsourcing...is part of our relationship with India...there is an obligation in any election campaign to talk about what’s on people’s minds.”⁹ In other words, Clinton was implying that Obama was not really serious, and the question remains, what exactly are her views regarding outsourcing and free trade.

In any event, whatever Clinton’s real views might actually be, she is taking a position that is favored by America’s unions, whose members have traditionally been solid and reliable supporters of Democratic candidates. The unions have long opposed trade agreements, which they consider to be a vehicle for industry to offshore American jobs in order to benefit from paying lower wages to workers overseas. Clinton is competing with Sanders for union votes, and cannot afford to alienate this critical power center in the Democratic party. In so doing, however, she has underscored the “America first” positions that Trump and Sanders have taken, and has thereby reinforced the anti-globalization sentiments not only of unions, but of a far larger number of Americans as well.

Trump’s major Republican rivals – Ted Cruz in particula – have also emphasized the need for more protection and have opposed TTP, though not as loudly as Trump himself. The fact that they too see the need to do so in order to win over working class whites, while not fearing pushback from all but a relatively small percentage of their other prospective voters, demonstrates yet again that bad trade policy makes for very good politics.

Trump’s position on trade, like that of Sanders, indeed that of Clinton and Cruz, is guaranteed to alienate America’s two strongest Asian allies, Japan and South Korea. Both, especially Japan, were reluctant to open up their economies as stipulated by TTP, but

finally reached agreement with the other signatories. They see the anti-trade positions taken by the candidates who have collected the most delegates in both parties as a clear betrayal or understandings that had been reached with Washington.

The negative impact of Trump's comments on trade, and—because they are not as incendiary—to a lesser extent also those of Sanders, Clinton and Cruz, is not limited to American relations with both Japan and South Korea. The TPP is a key element of the “pivot to Asia” which Clinton promoted when she was Secretary of State. Indeed, she herself launched the idea of a pivot in a widely read article that appeared on the website of the journal *Foreign Policy*.¹⁰ By backing away from TTP, Trump, Sanders and Clinton all risk alienating the agreement's other East Asian signatories—Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei and Singapore, and undermining the “pivot” even before it has fully materialized. Americans do not seem to realize that raising trade barriers with East Asia will wreck the supply chains that American firms rely on for producing finished goods. Raising American tariffs will prompt similar behavior by other states. The result will be a breakdown of the world's trading system, trade wars, and higher prices for American—and indeed all—consumers.

Trump, immigration, nativism

Trump's attitude toward immigration from, and trade with, Mexico and Central America also undermines Washington's security alliances with those countries. Trump's claim that he will bully Mexico into paying for a wall along the border with America further enflames relations with that country. Mexico's current and former presidents have angrily rejected the notion of paying for a wall, or

indeed, for the wall itself. Yet Trump's proposal plays into both the nativist and isolationist impulses of too many Americans to be lightly dismissed.

How then might Trump implement his plan? He claims that it would be “an easy deal.” Since America has a \$58 billion trade deficit with Mexico, he would have no problem getting Mexico to pay \$10 billion for a wall or “impounding” remittances. But a trade deficit does not mean that the government of the country in surplus necessarily has the available funds, even if it had the will, to offset that deficit with a cash payment.

The only way, it seems, for Trump to fulfill his commitment would be for America to invade Mexico, a reprise of its war with that country some 170 years ago, when General Winfield Scott, the commander of American forces, captured Mexico City. Trump could then install a puppet president, who would agree to pay for the wall. Clearly, Trump's proposal is as nonsensical as it is outrageous. But the fact that it resonates with a significant proportion of American voters is a source for deep concern.

Moreover, while Trump has focused on Mexico, it is a fact that a very large proportion of illegal aliens who migrate to America come from other states south of the American border, notably the impoverished and violence-prone states of Central America, notably Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua, as well as several south American republics, especially Bolivia and Peru. Trump's fulminations about Mexico, and the favorable reactions they have prompted, as well as his opposition to CAFTA (which he barely mentions), are therefore also a signal to these other states that, America's commitments under the Rio Treaty notwithstanding, those who support Trump are quite comfortable writing them off.

A defense posture that discounts allies

It is true that, in contrast to his stance on economic issues, Trump promises to restore American military strength (Sanders would cut defense budgets even further than has been the case in the past several years). He is a vocal proponent of increases in military force levels. He also would step up American air attacks on the forces of ISIS and has even suggested sending 30,000 American troops to fight the radical Islamist state.

Yet Trump seems to ignore the reality that America fights alongside allies, and has led coalitions of the willing in all its post-Cold War conflicts. Treaty commitments do not seem to bother Trump, or his supporters. Indeed, Trump has called for a reassessment of America's alliances generally, hinting strongly that he would withdraw from at least some of them.

Trump has stated that "South Korea is [a]very rich, great industrial country, and yet we're not reimbursed fairly for what we do...We're constantly sending our ships, sending our planes, doing our war games — we're reimbursed a fraction of what this is all costing." He does not feel that the United States gets much value for its Asian presence. Instead, he argues that "we were a very powerful, very wealthy country, and we are a poor country now. We're a debtor nation."¹¹

Such statements, coupled with his anti-trade rhetoric, not only would put paid to the pivot to Asia, but could push both Japan and South Korea toward neutrality. Such a development could in turn lead both states to shed their long-standing American nuclear umbrella and develop their own nuclear deterrent. In so doing, both countries would generate even more instability in northeast

Asia than is currently resulting from Kim Jong Un's warmongering. Indeed, Pyongyang may choose to launch a preemptive strike against the south if it fears that Seoul would press ahead with an indigenous nuclear program. Yet Trump appears willing to contemplate both South Korea and Japan becoming nuclear powers. As he told *The New York Times*, "But right now we're protecting, we're basically protecting Japan...And there'll be a point at which we're just not going to be able to do it anymore. Now, does that mean nuclear? It could mean nuclear."¹²

Trump's hostile rhetoric toward China and its trade practices could further exacerbate regional tensions. It could lead Beijing to jettison whatever restraints it had placed on even more aggressive activities in the East and South China Seas, and perhaps toward Taiwan as well. And it would encourage China to maintain if not increase its ongoing military buildup, which has resulted in America facing a new near-peer military competitor.

The bottom line for Trump is that no American alliance would avoid re-evaluation were he elected president, not even NATO. He has asserted with respect to NATO, that "We certainly can't afford to do this anymore...NATO is costing us a fortune, and yes, we're protecting Europe with NATO, but we're spending a lot of money." Indeed, he views NATO as "obsolete" and argues that NATO members "either... have to pay up for past deficiencies or they have to get out." And he adds "if it breaks up NATO, it breaks up NATO."¹³

Trump's evident hostility toward NATO has been rendered more plausible by his failure to disavow Vladimir Putin's endorsement, the first he received in his quest for the presidency. Indeed, Trump's attitude, and certainly that of Sanders, is likely to

reinforce Putin's inclination to test American willingness to push back against Russian attempts to further dominate Ukraine, to swallow up Moldova, or even to harass the Baltic States.

Moscow already perceives America as too inward looking to be considered a threat to its objectives. Clearly that was part of Putin's calculus when he absorbed Crimea, when his forces supported the Ukrainian separatists, and when he ramped up Soviet military operations in support of Bashar Assad. Given Trump's mild attitude toward Russia coupled with his opposition to TTIP, as well as Sanders' loathing of all things military, and Clinton's reversion economic isolationism, it should come as no surprise that Europeans are as worried about an increasingly introverted America as are its East Asian allies and friends.

Trump has also famously called for a halt to accepting Muslim immigrants, from the Middle East or anywhere else. In this regard his position is identical to those of Europe's demagogues seeking government office, as well as those of central and southeastern European politicians already power, most notably Hungary's Viktor Orban. Yet unlike the Orban and like-minded government officials, whose views on Middle Eastern immigrants do not have a major impact on the political calculations of Arab leaders, those of Trump certainly do. America's relationship with the Gulf States in particular is already exceedingly tenuous.

The Gulf States, indeed, most of America's heretofore staunch Sunni allies, distrust Barack Obama, whom they feel has cozied up to Iran, while abandoning America's long-time ally Hosni Mubarak. They are unhappy that the P-5+1 deal with Iran, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, to curtail its nu-

clear weapons program has resulted in the unfreezing of at least \$100 billion, enabling it to spend billions to undermine its regional rivals.¹⁴ Indeed, they worry that Obama envisages Iran as a partner that, like the Shah, would be the dominant state in the Gulf region. Trump has been critical of the Iran deal, but his attitude to Muslims worries the Gulf States that despite his tough rhetoric calling for an increased American military force posture in Iraq, a Trump presidency would more likely continue America's slow withdrawal from the region, leaving the moderate Sunni states at the mercy of an increasingly powerful Tehran.

The Arabs note that Americans, tired of their country's costly involvement in the Iraq War, generally supported Obama's desire to withdraw from Iraq, and, indeed, Afghanistan. Many of the Gulf Arabs link the American withdrawal of forces from Iraq to Nuri al-Maliki's ruthless persecution of that country's Sunni Arabs, which in turn spurred the rise of the Islamic State. Both Trump and Sanders have made it clear that they feel the war in Iraq was a mistake. Sanders is vehemently opposed to an American troop presence in that country. For his part, Trump proclaims that he will somehow prevail upon the Arab states both to finance American military operations in Iraq, and to bear the brunt of ground operations against ISIS. He therefore implies that if they fail to do so, America will bring its forces home.

The moderate Arab governments also note that while the East Coast elites keep pushing Obama to engage American forces more actively in support of the Syrian opposition, most Americans seem indifferent to the chaos in Syria, other than to oppose proposals to permit large numbers of Syrian refugees to enter the United States. And they see that Trump plays up to American fears

of Muslim terrorism as well as indifference to the events taking place in the Middle East, while Sanders has very little to say about anything that is taking place in the region.

Trump's attitude to Muslims affects more than just America's relations with the Arab world. Indonesia is, after all, the country with the world's largest Muslim population. Washington has significantly improved its relationship with Jakarta over the past decade, as both countries have watched Chinese behavior in the South China Sea with increasing unease. After more than a decade-long lapse in military cooperation, Washington and Jakarta restored full defense relations in 2005. The Obama Administration saw Indonesia as a key partner in the "pivot to Asia." US Navy and Marine forces now exercise with their Indonesian counterparts and Navy ships have made port visits to Bali. The improvement in relations could well be jeopardized by Trump's fulminations.

Trump has also upset America's Israeli allies. He has asserted that, "Because I'm a dealmaker I believe that I can put both sides together."¹⁵ He has also proclaimed that he "loves" Israel. On the other hand, Trump has questioned Israel's commitment to peace. True to his performances in other venues, Trump has crudely insulted his Jewish audiences. Israelis do not know what to make of him. Being used to unequivocal commitments of support from past American presidents, and already more distrustful of Washington because of their perception that Barack Obama is indifferent to their interests, Israelis worry that Trump the wheeler-dealer will impose an agreement with the Palestinians on them, and that he will have the support of an American public that is fed up with Middle East conflicts.

The Trump phenomenon and the new American isolationism

From George Washington's warning in his 1796 farewell address against "permanent alliances" to Thomas Jefferson's admonition against "entangling alliances" in his inaugural address five years later, to American isolationism in the 1920s and 1930s, to the Mansfield Amendments of the 1970s, America has long suffered bouts of an inward-looking posture that at times exploded into nasty nativism and all-out isolationism. Barack Obama, while no isolationist, expressed the desire of many Americans to escape the uncertainty of international affairs when in a May 2011 address to the Nation he asserted, "America, it is time to focus on nation building here at home."¹⁶ Trump and Sanders have both reinforced this attitude, Trump with his belligerent attitude toward all things foreign – to the point of even proposing to revoke America's visa waiver program, Sanders by focusing his campaign almost entirely on domestic issues. Of the two men, it is Trump who more openly brings out the isolationist strain in many Americans precisely because, unlike Sanders, he emphasizes the changes he would bring to America's standing abroad.

Ironically, Trump may be out of step with the American public on the issue defense spending. A recent poll found that more than 60 per cent of Americans favor a decrease in defense spending. Republicans, long considered to be more hawkish on defense, actually divide almost evenly on the issue, with 48 per cent supporting an increase in spending and 47 per cent supporting a decrease. The poll also revealed that a majority of Americans would cut spending on land, naval and air forces, as well as on missile defense and nuclear weapons. With regard to specific

weapons systems programs, a majority would reduce the aircraft carrier force and cancel the F-35, America's most modern fighter. A majority of Democrats would also cancel development of a new strategic bomber and would reduce the strategic nuclear submarine force. Somewhat less than half the Americans surveyed – 43 per cent – would withdraw virtually all troops from Afghanistan and close down all American bases there. Half all Democrats surveyed, as well as half of the Independents who identify with neither party, share that view.¹⁷

Trump has not emphasized increases in defense spending in his campaign speeches, however, despite giving lip service to such policies. In particular, he has avoided discussing the specifics of defense programs or the need to expand them. He has focused instead on the plight of veterans, which is actually a domestic issue rather than one with an impact on international security relations.

It is impossible to know what Trump might actually do if he were elected president, since so much of his campaigning is built on bluster. He may not be elected, indeed, he may not win the Republican Party's nomination. But Trump, and, for that matter, Bernie Sanders and to some extent Ted Cruz and even Hillary Clinton, each in his or her own way, reflects the anger of the American electorate. African-Americans are angry because they have not moved as far up the economic ladder as they expected when Barack Obama was elected, and then re-elected. Hispanics are angry because so many of their ethnic confreres have yet to see a clear path to citizenship, and resent the degree of support that Donald Trump's boasts about building a wall to keep Mexicans and others out of the United States seem to evoke. Muslims

are angry because there is a wide swath of the public that support Trump's anti-Muslim bigotry. The white working class is angry because it sees no real future, even as it loses jobs to overseas low wage competitors. The middle class is angry because its earnings and lifestyle have stagnated for a decade. And even those with a net worth of a million dollars, and therefore among the top ten per cent of wealthiest Americans, are also angry, because the value of their homes has not risen very much since the great recession, nor have their investments shown anything like a consistent positive return.

Resentment and fear constitute a major reason why far too many Americans appear to resonate to Trump's denunciation of trade negotiations, his hostility toward immigrants in general and Muslims and Mexicans in particular, and his skepticism toward America's alliances. The support that he has received is a cause for concern even if Trump fades entirely from the American political scene.

America's allies and friends have every reason to be apprehensive about where Washington may be headed over the next few years. There are still many Americans who also share that concern. One can only hope that the elections will yield an American president who can contain the twin evils of isolationism and nativism and restore America to its rightful place as an active leader of the Free World.

The author was Under Secretary of Defense (2001–2004) and Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (1985–87). He is a Senior Advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and is a fellow of the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences.

Notes

1. “Trumpians are Republicans and Democrats, hawks and doves, evangelicals and atheists, urbanites and suburbanites and men and women. They are united by their class suffering: growing income disparity, stagnant working-class wages, subpar health care, failing schools, unaffordable college tuitions, blighted urban areas, underwater mortgages and massive youth unemployment.” Keith Zakheim: “Why the Working Class Embraces Trump”, NorthJersey.com, 2016-03-09, <http://www.northjersey.com/opinion/opinion-guest-writers/why-the-working-class-embraces-trump-1.1524753>
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