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“Sh*t-hole Countries”: Was Trump’s Foreign Policy Racist?

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Throughout his years in the public eye, former president Donald Trump has frequently said things that reveal his belief that the construct of ‘race’ is a valid measure of human difference and human worth. In countless public utterances, he has used racist, derogatory language to insult, belittle, and abuse non-white people. He has also conflated whiteness with American-ness, implying that the United States is a racial community of white people whose non-white residents cannot be incorporated into the nation because of their race. After all, he rose to national political prominence primarily through his prolonged racist campaign against President Barack Obama, claiming that Obama had been born in Kenya and was also a Muslim. And his announcement in June 2015 that he would seek the presidency featured the defining comment of what might be called Trump’s “racial panic.” Speaking about immigration to a group of cheering supporters, Trump said, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”¹

His many racist remarks, so much a part of his public identity on the campaign trail in 2016, foretold his administration’s approach in domestic policy. In areas such as public housing, immigration, health care, policing and incarceration, environmental stewardship, and civil and voting rights, among others, Trump pursued policies that made life worse for people of color. Certainly, his immigration, detention, and deportation policies were driven directly by a racist agenda that sought to halt and reverse the inflow into the United States of non-white (as well as Muslim) people.² The same could be said of his blatant attempt to curry favor with white suburban voters by scrapping an Obama-era rule to ensure localities receiving Housing and Urban Developments funds complied with the 1968 Fair Housing Act, whose aim was to combat racial discrimination in housing. (In 1973, Trump and his real estate company were sued by the Justice Department for housing discrimination).³ And in responding to the Black Lives Matter movement, which in the summer of 2020

¹ “Donald Trump Announces a Presidential Bid,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/Statement> For his birther remarks about Obama, Laura Ingraham Show, March 30, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqaS9OCOTZs>. For a detailed analysis of Trump’s racist and bigoted public statements, see German Lopez, “Donald Trump’s Long History of Racism, from the 1970s to 2020,” *Vox*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/25/12270880/donald-trump-racist-racism-history> For verification of Trump’s most notorious comments, see Ella Lee, “Fact Check: 12 of 28 Comments Deemed Racist on Viral List are Trump’s Direct Speech,” *USA Today*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/10/30/fact-check-12-28-trump-comments-deemed-racist-direct-speech/6062530002/> and “Fact Check: Trump had been accused of racism by contemporaries prior to presidential campaign,” *Reuters*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/factcheck-trump-racism/fact-check-trump-had-been-accused-of-racism-by-contemporaries-prior-to-presidential-campaign-idUSL1N2MT312>. For a similar inventory, see David Leonhardt and Ian Prasad Philbrick, “Donald Trump’s Racism: The Definitive List, Updated,” *New York Times*, Jan. 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/15/opinion/leonhardt-trump-racist.html>. On Trump’s use of white nationalist tropes, see Rogers M. Smith and Desmond King, “White Protectionism in America,” *Perspectives on Politics* 19:2 (2021): 460–78.

² Charles Kamasaki, “US Immigration Policy: A Classic, Unappreciated Example of Structural Racism,” *Brookings*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/03/26/us-immigration-policy-a-classic-unappreciated-example-of-structural-racism/>. For up-to-date data on detention and deportation, see <https://www.freedomformigrants.org/>. An exceptionally rich syllabus of writing on immigration policy and history has been compiled by the University of Minnesota Immigration History Research Center: <https://immigrationsyllabus.lib.umn.edu/about/>. See also Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2019); an epilogue on xenophobia during the pandemic appears in the 2021 paperback edition.

³ Tim Nelson, “Trump Administration’s Highly-Politicized Roll Back of Obama-Era Fair Housing Rule,” *Architectural Digest*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/trump-hud-fair-housing-act>; Laura Kusisto, “Trump Administration Plans Roll Back of Low-Income Housing

mobilized millions of people in nationwide protests against police violence towards Black Americans, Trump again revealed his antagonism towards communities of color, not least by referring to the protesters as “thugs,” “terrorists” and “anarchists.”⁴ And when Trump pursued policies designed to further enrich the wealthy and hollow out regulations that inhibited corporate profits – such as his Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, or his gutting of the Environmental Protection Agency – his policies unmistakably hurt communities of color as they benefitted economic elites.⁵

Racism, then, shaped Trump’s domestic agenda. Did it also shape his foreign policy? Here, the precise connection between Trump’s racism and his foreign policy seems at first glance less explicit than in the domestic arena. Naturally, there is ample evidence of Trump using vulgar language or racial slurs in discussing foreign peoples; in January 2018, for example, Trump referred to African nations as “shithole countries,” adding that the U.S. should want immigrants from countries such as Norway rather than from Haiti or El Salvador.⁶ Beyond these sorts of ugly slurs, though, where do we see racism shaping Trump’s foreign policy? This essay does not analyze every arena of foreign and national security policy in the Trump years. Instead, it argues that Trump viewed the world primarily through the lens of race, and so scholars who examine U.S. engagement with the world in the 2016-2020 period must account for Trump’s racialization of virtual all policy problems.

Historians who have studied the intersection of race and international relations offer a method for this kind of inquiry. In seeking to evaluate the role of racism in foreign policy, they look not merely for the occasional vulgar phrase or insulting slight. Rather, they point to the ways that race is woven into the structures of power through which the United States acts in the world. From its origins as a slave-holding society to its long embrace of legalized racial segregation, the United States has used race as an organizing framework for its engagement with the world; it would be strange indeed if we did not find it active in Trump’s administration as well. And sure enough, we do find it.⁷

Rules,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2020; National Low Income Housing Coalition, “Trump Administration Eliminates Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Rule, NLIHC and other Advocates Condemn Action, Rhetoric,” July 27, 2020, <https://nlihc.org/resource/trump-administration-eliminates-affirmatively-furthering-fair-housing-rule-nlihc-and-other>

⁴ Megan Guza, “President Trump calls Pittsburgh Protesters ‘Anarchists,’ ‘Thugs,’” *Trib Live*, September 8, 2020, <https://triblive.com/local/president-trump-tweets-about-pittsburgh-protesters/>. Trump routinely fabricated statements allegedly made by the movement. For example, he falsely claimed that “the stated goal of BLM organization, people, is to achieve the destruction of the nuclear family, abolish the police, abolish prisons, abolish border security, abolish capitalism, and abolish school choice—that’s what their stated goals are.” Daniel Villarreal, “Trump Says the Black Lives Matter Movement Is ‘Destroying Many Black Lives,’” *Newsweek*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/trump-says-black-lives-matter-movement-destroying-many-black-lives-1534411>.

⁵ Nolan McCaskill, “Trump’s policies for Black Americans,” *Politico*, November 1, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/01/trump-black-americans-policies-433744>; Greg Miller, “Allegations of Racism Have Marked Trump’s Presidency and Become Key Issue as Election Nears,” *Washington Post*, September 23, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-race-record/2020/09/23/332b0b68-f10f-11ea-b796-2dd09962649c_story.html. On Trump’s gutting of the EPA, see Nadja Popovich, Livia Albeck-Ripka and Kendra Pierre-Louis, “The Trump Administration Rolled Back More Than 100 Environmental Rules,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/climate/trump-environment-rollbacks-list.html>. For an extremely detailed list of Trump’s weakening of civil rights rules and laws, see Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, “Trump Administration Civil and Human Rights Rollbacks,” <https://civilrights.org/trump-rollbacks/>. On the impact of Trump’s racism on his millions of Americans generally, see Eddie Glaude, “Don’t Let the Loud Bigots Distract You. America’s Real Problem with Race Cuts Far Deeper,” *Time*, September 17, 2018, <https://time.com/5388356/our-racist-soul/>.

⁶ Ali Vitali, Kasie Hunt and Frank Thorp V, “Trump Referred to Haiti and African Nations as ‘Shithole’ Countries,” *NBC News*, January 11, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-referred-haiti-african-countries-shithole-nations-n836946>.

⁷ For a now-classic work, see Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). On the long tradition of using race as a framework to define America’s place in the world, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000) and Paul Gordon Lauren, *Power and Prejudice: The Politics and Diplomacy of Racial Discrimination* (Boulder: Westview, 1996). John Dower’s influential work, especially his *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), reshaped the historiography of the Second World War by showing how race shaped the U.S.-Japan conflict. Examples of the rich literature on race as a feature of U.S. foreign relations in the Cold War include Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and an excellent overview of themes and recent research, Brenda

We might start by noting the lack of racial and gender diversity in his entourage of senior officials. Not since the first days of the Reagan administration thirty-six years earlier had a presidential Cabinet been so white.⁸ This pattern held in his judicial appointments. In 2020, the Associated Press reported that “Eighty-five percent of [Trump’s] Senate-confirmed U.S attorneys are white men... compared with 58% in Democratic President Barack Obama’s eight years, 73% during Republican George W. Bush’s two terms and at most 63% under Democrat Bill Clinton.”⁹ Trump appointed 226 federal judges; nine of these were Black; a total of 37 were non-white.¹⁰ In the national security field, whiteness also ruled. Trump relied upon an all-white team, from his secretaries of Defense, State, Homeland Security, as well his directors of national intelligence, his CIA directors, and the National Security advisors. With a few exceptions (Gina Haspel at CIA, Kirstjen Nielsen at Homeland Security, Nikki Haley as UN Ambassador), these posts were held by white men, and Trump frequently made important statements on national security topics accompanied only by white male senior officials.

Some analysts have argued that these demonstrations of white masculinity were carefully staged. Following a presidential announcement in January 2020 on Iran policy during which Trump was surrounded by an all-male phalanx of advisors, Kate Brannen of the online forum *Just Security* noted that Trump meant to signal not just unity of command: “this carefully choreographed moment sent another message: The only people who can handle this national security crisis are white men.” Such images have global implications, Brannen argued: “Instead of setting an example for the rest of the world, the United States, under Trump, is sanctioning a worldview that excludes women and people of color from positions of power and influence.” Indeed, Trump’s White House made a habit of releasing photographs of the president surrounded by teams of white men. And near the close of his term in office, Trump actively banned diversity and anti-bias training among federal contractors, the largest of which are in the defense industries. (President Joe Biden revoked this order on January 20, 2021.)¹¹

In addition to the personnel on which Trump relied, we might point to the ideology that underpinned Trump’s world view: “America First,” a term he used in his campaign and which he stressed in his inaugural address.¹² Historians know all too well the racist, xenophobic, and bigoted origins of this term, which are closely entwined in the anti-immigration rhetoric and nativist animus of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Popularized by Woodrow Wilson when he still held to a policy on non-intervention in the Great War, the slogan was for a time subsumed under the equally racist slogan “100% American”—a term promulgated by the federal government in order to silence opposition of some immigrant communities toward the American war effort. The slogan “America First” flourished alongside a surge of nativism in the interwar period, reflected especially in the 1924 Immigration Act, which emerged in the midst of widespread white anxiety about immigration of Jews, Italians, and Slavs. The term became notorious in 1940, when the America First Committee mobilized a public relations campaign to oppose aid to the European nations then fighting Nazi Germany. And even though many members of the America First movement felt motivated chiefly by pacifism, some of the organization’s most visible spokespersons

Gayle Plummer, *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945-1988* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003). International Relations scholars seem less inclined to give attention to race as a category of analysis in foreign policy. For a critique, see Kelebogile Zvobgo and Meredith Loken, “Why Race Matters in International Relations,” *Foreign Policy*, June 19, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/19/why-race-matters-international-relations-ir/#>

⁸ Jasmine Lee, “Trump’s Cabinet So Far Is More White and Male Than Any First Cabinet Since Reagan’s,” *New York Times*, March 10, 2017.

⁹ Jake Bleiberg, Aaron Morrison, and Jim Mustian, “Trump’s Top Federal Prosecutors are Overwhelmingly White Men,” *The Associated Press*, October 6, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-donald-trump-shootings-racial-injustice-george-w-bush-f6995edcc2158df1f8b0cb4f9574bdaf>

¹⁰ Pew Research Center, “How Trump compares with other recent presidents in appointing federal judges,” January 13, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/13/how-trump-compares-with-other-recent-presidents-in-appointing-federal-judges/>

¹¹ Kate Brannen, “Trump’s white, male team is a bad look for America and bad for national security, too,” *USA Today*, January 13, 2020. For further examples, see Mike Moore, “White House releases photo of Trump in Situation Room after Iran attacks,” *New York Post*, January 9, 2020; Carlos Ballesteros, “Rex Tillerson Is Making the State Department A Lot More White,” *Newsweek*, November 26, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/rex-tillerson-diversity-state-department-foreign-service-722653>; Annie Lowrey and Steven Johnson, “The Very Male Trump Administration,” *The Atlantic*, March 28, 2018. On Executive Order 13950 and its revocation, see U.S. Department of Labor, “President Biden Revokes Executive Order 13950,” <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ofccp/executive-order-13950>.

¹² On his inaugural address, see David A. Graham, “‘America First’: Donald Trump’s Populist Address,” *The Atlantic*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/trump-inaugural-speech-analysis/513956/>.

such as aviator Charles Lindbergh embraced anti-Semitic conspiracies and spoke of the danger of “the Jews” leading America into war.¹³ An “America First” party ran Gerald L.K. Smith, a notorious anti-Semite and Nazi sympathizer, for president in 1944. And the Nixon-era speech-writer and television personality Pat Buchanan relaunched the slogan as his own when he ran for president in the early 1990s on a staunchly anti-immigration platform.¹⁴ The term “America First,” then, has long been associated with racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic beliefs.¹⁵

“America First” as a slogan and an ideology defined Trump’s December 2017 *National Security Strategy*. In the foreword to this document, Trump declared that “my America First foreign policy ... [is] prioritizing the interests of our citizens and protecting our sovereign rights as a nation.” He continued:

The United States faces an extraordinarily dangerous world, filled with a wide range of threats that have intensified in recent years. When I came into office, rogue regimes were developing nuclear weapons and missiles to threaten the entire planet. Radical Islamist terror groups were flourishing. Terrorists had taken control of vast swaths of the Middle East. Rival powers were aggressively undermining American interests around the globe. At home, porous borders and unenforced immigration laws had created a host of vulnerabilities. Criminal cartels were bringing drugs and danger into our communities. Unfair trade practices had weakened our economy and exported our jobs overseas. Unfair burden-sharing with our allies and inadequate investment in our own defense had invited danger from those who wish us harm. Too many Americans had lost trust in our government, faith in our future, and confidence in our values.¹⁶

The world posed threats of every kind, then, from terrorism to rogue nuclear states to porous borders and criminal cartels. After one year in office, naturally, Trump claimed to have beaten back those threats, chiefly by “defending America’s sovereignty without apology.” He concluded vaguely by stating that his global strategy “puts America First.” Does this constitute racism? That depends on the reader’s willingness to place Trump’s language in context. On the face of it, racist remarks do not appear in the *National Security Strategy*. Yet the theme throughout is that the world beyond America’s borders poses only peril; that a militarized border and a massive defense apparatus provide the only means to protect the United States from this raging chaos; and that those who would prioritize international cooperation should not be entrusted with defense of the homeland—a homeland that Trump promised to make whiter, more Christian, and more “American.”¹⁷

If Trump carried with him into the White House a personal ideology of racial animus and white supremacy, how did this belief system influence his policies toward the external world? His immigration policies provide the obvious starting place. Trump’s first act as president was the January 27, 2017 Executive Order 13769 (“Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States”), which temporarily barred “immigrants and non-immigrants” from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States; it also dramatically lowered the number of refugees allowed into the United States and suspended the entry of Syrian refugees indefinitely.¹⁸ Restricting the entry of aliens into the United States is hardly a new policy; in some form, it has been going on since the founding of the nation. Trump declared that “this is not about religion—this is about terror and keeping our country safe.”¹⁹ He also

¹³ For the text of Charles Lindbergh’s September 11, 1941 speech in Des Moines, Iowa, see <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/lindbergh-accuses-jews-of-pushing-u-s-to-war>

¹⁴ E.J. Dionne, “Buchanan Challenges Bush with ‘America First’ Call,” *Washington Post*, December 11, 1991.

¹⁵ For a recent survey of the term and its historical roots, see Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: The Entangled History of “America First” and the “American Dream”* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 39-61, 71-89, 213-40.

¹⁶ *National Security Strategy of the United States*, December 2017, at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

¹⁷ *National Security Strategy of the United States*.

¹⁸ *Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States* <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/02/01/2017-02281/protecting-the-nation-from-foreign-terrorist-entry-into-the-united-states>

¹⁹ John Greenberg, “Trump’s Immigration Ban: 4 Key Questions Answered,” *PolitiFact*, January 29, 2017, <https://www.politifact.com/article/2017/jan/29/trumps-immigration-ban-4-key-questions-answered/>

fended off criticism of his order by likening it to a 2011 order by President Obama, which halted Iraqis from receiving visas for six months. But Obama's order was a response to a specific terrorist threat and was much narrower in scope, while Trump's order appeared to fulfill a campaign pledge that Trump would ban Muslims from entering the United States.²⁰

Taken at face value, one might plausibly argue that Trump's Executive Order 13769 did no more than tighten entry rules for travelers from nations with significant terrorist activity, out of an abundance of caution for U.S. security. Yet historians know that presidential orders reflect a specific context. For Trump to sign a ban on entry by travelers from Muslim nations on his first day in office, following a presidential campaign steeped in racist language and dog-whistles (the Mexicans-as-rapists comment, his public statement that he personally witnessed "thousands and thousands" of Arab Americans cheering the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, his allegations that immigrants, or Blacks, or Hispanics, were "overwhelmingly" responsible for higher crime rates, his retweeting of white nationalists), suggests that Trump wished to send a deliberate message: all Muslims would be viewed as sympathetic with terrorism until proven otherwise.²¹

Certainly, that is how professional diplomats saw it. Over 1,000 U.S. State Department employees immediately signed a circular letter criticizing the ban, saying it "runs counter to core American values of nondiscrimination, fair play, and extending a warm welcome to foreign visitors and immigrants." The letter asserted that the ban would not make America safer—almost no attacks of any kind had been perpetrated on U.S. soil by nationals of the black-listed nations—but would instead "sour relations" with valued partners in the Muslim world and increase anti-American sentiment. Likening the ban to the racist immigration policies of the 1920s and the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II, the letter said that Trump's ban "calls back to some of the worst times in our history."²² Nevertheless, restricting the entry of Muslims to the United States became a signature policy for the administration. Even after the ban was challenged in court on the grounds that it used religion as a basis for halting entry, Trump pursued further restrictions in Executive Order 13780 and Presidential Proclamation 9645, the last of which was upheld by a divided U.S. Supreme Court in *Trump v. Hawaii* in June 2018.²³

Trump's obsession with the U.S. border reflects his ideology of racial hierarchy and white nationalism. Take Trump's frequent public telling of a parable about a wounded snake that, after being rescued and nursed back to good health, bites its rescuer. The tale effectively warned his listeners about the mortal danger of immigration.²⁴ His public remarks throughout his presidency emphasized the idea of "threat" from non-white people crossing into the United States. He made every effort to highlight this alleged threat, even in his inaugural address, when he vowed to "unite the civilized world against Radical Islamic Terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth." Trump wished to unite the "civilized world" – another venerable code-word for white – in a campaign to "eradicate" (why

²⁰ Glenn Kessler, "Trump's facile claim that his refugee policy is similar to Obama's in 2011," *Washington Post*, January 29, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/01/29/trumps-facile-claim-that-his-refugee-policy-is-similar-to-obama-in-2011/> On Trump's campaign pledge that the U.S. needed "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States," see Tessa Berenson, "Donald Trump Calls For 'Complete Shutdown' of Muslim Entry to U.S.," *Time*, December 7, 2015.

²¹ Glenn Kessler, "Trump's outrageous claim that 'thousands' of New Jersey Muslims celebrated the 9/11 attacks," *Washington Post*, November 22, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/11/22/donald-trumps-outrageous-claim-that-thousands-of-new-jersey-muslims-celebrated-the-911-attacks/>; James Walker, "Trump Tweet Blaming Crime on Blacks, Hispanics Resurfaces After 'Least Racist Person' Claim," *Newsweek*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/trump-tweet-blaming-crime-blacks-hispanics-resurfaces-debate-claim-1541570>; "Trump Retweets Video Of Apparent Supporter Saying 'White Power'," *NPR*, June 28, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/06/28/884392576/trump-retweets-video-of-apparent-supporter-saying-white-power>.

²² "Dissent Channel: Alternatives to Closing Doors in Order to Secure Our Borders," not dated, <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/3438487/Dissent-Memo.pdf> and see Jeffrey Gettleman, "State Department Dissent Cable on Trump's Ban Draws 1,000 Signatures," *New York Times*, January 31, 2017.

²³ Relevant documentation for the case may be found at <https://www.supremecourt.gov/docket/docketfiles/html/public/17-965.html>. *Executive Order 13780*, "Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States," <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/03/09/2017-04837/protecting-the-nation-from-foreign-terrorist-entry-into-the-united-states>; Proclamation 9645, "Enhancing Vetting Capabilities and Processes for Detecting Attempted Entry Into the United States by Terrorists or Other Public-Safety Threats," September 24, 2017, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-201700685/pdf/DCPD-201700685.pdf>.

²⁴ Karen Pinchin, "Insects, Floods and 'The Snake': What Trump's Use of Metaphors Reveals," *PBS Frontline*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/insects-floods-and-the-snake-what-trumps-use-of-metaphors-reveals/>

not exterminate?) certain Muslims. Indeed, his inaugural address conjured up the looming specter of racial violence. America, he declared, was menaced by “the crime, and the gangs, and the drugs that have stolen too many lives,” terms that hearkened back to his racist campaign statements about Mexican rapists and Black criminals. Other racialized threats loomed: He alleged that “foreign industry” had become wealthy at the expense of the United States; that the United States had “defended other nations’ borders while refusing to defend our own;” and spent “trillions” on infrastructure for others while ignoring needs at home. The “wealth” of the nation had been handed over to foreigners, he asserted, and the only way to reverse the flow was to adopt a policy of “America First,” which translated into emotional terms meant this: “At the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America,” implying that disloyalty and treachery lurked behind America’s decline.²⁵

What nation, in Trump’s mind, stood out as threatening the wealth and prosperity of the United States? If “Mexico” had become shorthand for the immigration threat, and “Muslim” came to stand in for the terrorism threat, “China” came to represent the non-white, non-western economic threat to the birthright of American workers. Of course, it is possible to see China as an economic and geo-strategic rival without being a racist. Much of the U.S. foreign policy and intelligence community depicts China as a significant military threat to U.S. interests and allies in the Asia-Pacific region.²⁶ And U.S. economic policy towards China is shaped by the fact that China is the world’s second largest economy and a direct competitor in global markets. The wisdom of Trump’s trade war against China, which sharply increased protectionist tariffs against Chinese goods, was hotly debated during his four years in office, but U.S.-China economic competition long predates Trump’s presidency.²⁷

Yet for Trump, threats from a foreign competitor had to be couched in racist terms if they were to become legible to his particular audience, a base that he taught to view the world in terms of racial conflict. Not surprisingly, Trump’s officials adopted his framing. In May 2019, the Trump State Department described the U.S.-China rivalry as “a clash of civilizations.” The Policy Planning Staff director, Kiron Skinner, said China “poses a unique challenge ... because the regime in Beijing isn’t a child of Western philosophy and history.” The Cold War constituted “a fight within the Western family,” while the coming conflict with China is “the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian.”²⁸

But the most egregious example of Trump’s use of racial epithets in the context of the U.S.-China rivalry was his persistent designation of the COVID-19 virus as the “kung flu” or “Chinese virus.” Administration spokespersons defended this blatant racism because the virus erupted first in Wuhan, China. But when confronted with data showing a clear correlation between such anti-China comments and a spike in hate crimes against Asian Americans, the administration did not change course; “it’s not racist at all,” Trump said.²⁹ Yet clearly Trump’s anti-Chinese rhetoric sought to demonize China as a hostile civilization, a rival economy that threatened American workers, and the malevolent progenitor of a deadly virus that deliberately aimed to harm Americans. During the 2020 presidential campaign, Trump’s

²⁵ “President Trump’s Inaugural Address, Annotated,” January 20, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/01/20/510629447/watch-live-president-trumps-inauguration-ceremony>. For an inquiry into Trump’s demonization of Latinos generally, see Stephanie L. Canizales and Jody Agius Vallejo, “Latinos and Racism in the Trump Era,” *Daedalus* 150:2 (Spring 2021): 150-164.

²⁶ See for example Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community,” April 9, 2021, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf>

²⁷ For a review of the debate, see Geoffrey Gertz, “Did Trump’s tariffs benefit American workers and national security?” *Brookings*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/votervital/did-trumps-tariffs-benefit-american-workers-and-national-security/>.

²⁸ Tara Francis Chan, “State Department Official on China Threat: For First Time U.S. Has ‘Great Power Competitor That Is Not Caucasian,’” *Newsweek*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-threat-state-department-race-caucasian-1413202>; Steven Ward, “Because China isn’t ‘Caucasian,’ the U.S. is planning for a ‘clash of civilizations,’” *Washington Post*, May 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/05/04/because-china-isnt-caucasian-us-is-planning-clash-civilizations-that-could-be-dangerous/>

²⁹ Kimmy Yam, “Trump Can’t Claim Kung Flu Doesn’t Affect Asian Americans in This Climate, Experts Say,” *NBC News*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/trump-can-t-claim-kung-flu-doesn-t-affect-asian-n1231812>; Katie Rogers, Lara Jakes and Ana Swanson, “Trump Defends Using ‘Chinese Virus’ Label, Ignoring Growing Criticism,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/politics/china-virus.html>. On the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes, see Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, “Anti-Chinese Rhetoric Tied to Racism against Asian Americans,” Stop AAPI Hate Report, June 17, 2020, http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Anti-China_Rhetoric_Report_6_17_20.pdf; and Elizabeth Weise, “Anti-Asian Hashtags Soared after Donald Trump First Tied COVID-19 to China on Twitter, Study Shows,” *USA Today*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/03/18/anti-asian-hashtags-donald-trump-covid-19-tweet-study/4728444001/>

advisers admitted that making China into a villain was good politics. “Trump has always been successful when he’s had a bogeyman, and China is the perfect bogeyman,” said Chris LaCivita, a longtime Republican strategist.³⁰ In Trump’s worldview, then, it seems there was really no distinction between foreign economic or geostrategic threats and a racialized threat to the homeland. When arranging a hierarchy of global threats to the United States, what mattered most to Trump in assessing rivals was not military or economic power but the “enduring” characteristics of race.

Finally, what about Africa, which Trump so rudely dismissed in his vulgar slur? Trump gave fairly little time to Africa during his administration. In late 2018, National Security Adviser John Bolton laid out the administration’s approach: Africa was seen mainly as an arena of great-power competition, and Bolton urged African governments to choose the United States over China and Russia in this contest. The new strategy Bolton unveiled called for private-sector investment in economic development, while downgrading development and humanitarian aid. The human problems that beset many African nations—poverty, disease, resource depletion, ethnic and religious conflict, civil war, and so on—did not attract much attention from Bolton. Instead, he emphasized “America First” themes of a global conflict with China and “radical Islamic terrorism;” Africa was merely a backdrop for these great-power concerns.³¹ Significantly, the Trump administration also asked Congress in 2018 to rescind funding for curbing the Ebola virus, and prevented U.S. health experts from working on the frontlines of the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Shockingly, the administration also dismantled the global health security and biodefense directorate on the National Security Council, a move that had catastrophic effects during the global COVID-19 pandemic.³² It might not be an overstatement, then, to say that Trump’s racism contributed to a weakening of global health infrastructure, which in turn left America vulnerable to a global pandemic that so far has claimed over 600,000 U.S. lives.³³

The implications of incorporating race into analyses of diplomacy and strategy are significant. To make sense of the international history of the Trump era, scholars will find the conventional frameworks of great-power rivalry insufficient. The evidence suggests that Donald Trump understood world affairs chiefly as a conflict of “races;” and he sought to govern through a rhetorical strategy that emphasized a racial threat to the white homeland. He offered himself to his followers as the only one who truly perceived the threat and the only one who could halt it. Scholars who seek to unravel the priorities and objectives of Trump’s foreign policy must start here, with the former president’s ideology of white supremacy, his deployment of racial panic, and his reduction of world affairs to an existential struggle for survival among mythological races.

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³⁰ Jonathan Martin and Maggie Haberman, “A Key G.O.P. Strategy: Blame China. But Trump Goes Off Message,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/us/politics/trump-china-virus.html>

³¹ John R. Bolton, “A New Africa Strategy: Expanding Economic and Security Ties on the Basis of Mutual Respect,” Heritage Foundation, December 13, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/HL1306.pdf>. Mark Landler and Edward Wong, “Bolton Outlines a Strategy for Africa That’s Really About Countering China,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/13/us/politics/john-bolton-africa-china.html>. The theme of Africa as little more than scenery echoed through the October 2018 trip of the First Lady Melania Trump to Africa, when she visited Nairobi National Park while wearing a white pith helmet, headgear that is associated with British colonialism. Marisa Schwartz Taylor, “Melania Trump in Africa: Scenes from a Solo Trip, Framed by Her Husband,” *New York Times*, October 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/03/us/melania-trump-africa-trip.html>

³² Jeremy Youde, “The U.S. has pulled back its Ebola response in Congo,” *Washington Post*, November 8, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/11/08/the-u-s-has-pulled-back-its-ebola-response-in-congo-heres-the-story/?noredirect=on>; Lauren Weber, “Sudden Departure Of White House Global Health Security Head Has Experts Worried,” *HuffPost*, October 5, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/tim-ziemer-global-health-security-leaves_n_5af37dfbc4b0859d11d02290.

³³ For a critical assessment of Bolton’s dissolution of the Global Health Security and Biodefense team on the National Security Council, see Jeremy Konydyk, “Lessons Ignored: John Bolton’s Bogus Defense of ‘Streamlining’ Away Our Bio-Readiness,” *Just Security*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/69197/lessons-ignored-john-boltons-bogus-defense-of-streamlining-away-our-bio-readiness/>.

the World in the 1950s (New York, 2018), which was a *New York Times* bestseller. He is now writing “FDR and the Dictators: Fascism, Democracy and America’s Road to World War II.”

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