

**Will Trump’s Nationalism Change American Foreign Policy? A Review Essay on Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms’s *Donald Trump: The Making of a Worldview*. (Endeavor Press, 2017).**

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**D**onald Trump’s presidency will be an ideal case study for a question that is as old as the discipline of international relations: do individuals matter? Structural realism has long held that variation among individual policymakers has little impact on the behavior of states compared to structural features of the international system, such as the distribution of power.<sup>1</sup> Almost all other research programs, including classical and neoclassical realism and constructivism, by contrast, hold that policymakers’ beliefs exert a significant and independent influence.<sup>2</sup> Trump’s election is almost tailor-made as a test case for these longstanding academic disputes between partisans of Kenneth Waltz’s first and third “images.”<sup>3</sup>

Trump’s ideology is a departure from that of any American president for at least a century, if not longer. And Trump does have an ideology. Some observers, including President Barack Obama, having rightly observed that Trump is not a conservative, wrongly *conclude* that he has no discernable ideology at all. Trump, they

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979). Robert Jervis, “Realism, neoliberalism, and cooperation: understanding the debate,” *International Security* 24:1 (1999), 42-63. See also John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001) for Mearsheimer’s “offensive realism,” which shares important characteristics with structural realism.

<sup>2</sup> See Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1948) for a statement of classical realism, which leaves more room for the role of individuals. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), for his “Christian Realism.” For constructivism, see Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 1999 and Dale Copeland, “The constructivist challenge to structural realism: A review essay,” *International Security* 25:2 (2000): 187-212.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

assume, is a pragmatist.<sup>4</sup> This conclusion gives too much credit to Trump's campaign propaganda, which presented him as a consummate doer, a businessman, and a man of action concerned with solving problems and free of ideological blinkers.

As Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms have helpfully illustrated in their new book, *Donald Trump: The Making of a Worldview*, that view has little to support it.<sup>5</sup> Laderman and Simms have done an important service to historians and political scientists with their new book. They have assembled a useful compendium of primary sources of Trump's own words stretching back to 1980 to paint a picture of Trump's beliefs. They relied almost exclusively on interviews with Trump, largely discounting his ghostwritten books, to get closer to an unfiltered view of Trump's thinking. The body of the book comprises extended quotations and excerpts from these interviews, bookended by concise and insightful analysis by these two British historians. Their work is an essential primer and starting point for the scholarly analysis of Trump and his political movement.

Since he emerged as a major figure in New York real estate in the early 1980s, Trump has commented regularly, extensively, and on the record about American foreign policy, especially trade policy. As Laderman and Simms show, very little has changed since his earliest interviews: Trump has been essentially on message for nearly 40 years. The picture that emerges is not of an intellectually flexible pragmatist. Rather, Trump emerges as a remarkably consistent nationalist. That is not the term that Laderman and Simms use, but it is difficult to come to any other conclusion. They explain Trump as a confluence of Jacksonianism and "protectionist isolationism"; later they call him an adherent of "national capitalism," as opposed to the international variety (KL 160 and 6868).

Essential to that worldview is Trump's a "zero-sum view of the world" (KL 212). They quote Trump musing in 1980 that he saw "life to a certain extent as combat" (KL 434). This is almost identical to the pursuit of "competitive prestige" that British essayist George Orwell identified as the defining trait of nationalists.<sup>6</sup> Trump admitted in the 1980 interview—his first on the national stage—that respect is the most important thing for leaders because it is the leverage by which a leader achieves anything else (KL 816). Laderman and Simms excerpt at least 13 separate quotations from Trump in which he expresses concern that others are "laughing" at the United States or its leaders, typically coupled with his assessment of American leaders' "stupidity." In 1987, to take just one example, he told television host Larry King that other countries "laugh at us behind our backs, they laugh at us because of our stupidity and [that of our] leaders." (KL 89). According to Laderman and Simms, "For Trump, almost every international problem that besets the United States is explained by the idiocy of its leaders" (KL 85).

Trump's zero-sum worldview is most evident in trade and economic policy because—and this is one of Laderman's and Simms's most interesting observations—those are Trump's main concerns. "Trump does not

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Morici, "Decoding the Donald's approach," *The Washington Times*, 19 December 2016. Carol Lee, "Obama Says Donald Trump Will Be Driven by Pragmatism Not Ideology as President," *Wall Street Journal*, 15 November 2016. Ben Shapiro, "Is Donald Trump a Pragmatist?" *National Review*, 16 November 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms's *Donald Trump: The Making of a Worldview* (Endeavor Press, 2017). All parenthetical citations refer to Kindle locations.

<sup>6</sup> George Orwell, "Notes on Nationalism," *Polemic*, London, 1945.

take other factors, such as ideology or raw military power much into account,” they claim (KL 247). This is where Trump’s well-known protectionism originates. Trump is a neo-mercantilist who spent the 1980s fretting about America’s trade deficit with Japan; the only significant evolution of his thought since then is the substitution of Mexico and China for Japan as the *bête noire* of American trade policy. In the broader sweep of Trump’s thinking about the world, he is concerned primarily with trade relations and comparatively little with security concerns.

Insofar as he pays attention to military and security affairs, his main concern has been that the United States has been “ripped off” by its allies who are free-riding on American protection, and that the American standard of living has declined because of the comparatively fewer resources available for consumption (KL 127, 1921, 1922, 6715). Trump’s comments about America’s security concerns have “focused more closely on America’s friends than its avowed enemies,” in Laderman and Simms’s analysis (KL 6719). Trump had nothing to say about the Cold War or its end. He expressed tepid support for the 2003 Iraq War and stronger support for the Libyan intervention before quickly turning against both. He warned the United States should get “tough” with the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks of 2001—and his only comments on Afghanistan since then have been to criticize the practice of “nation-building” there.

The combination of Trump’s overall neglect of traditional security concerns and, when he does pay attention, his greater concern over the balance of burden-sharing with allies than superiority over rivals, creates a dangerous blind spot. Trump either does not notice or does not care about the single issue usually considered most important to U.S. interests abroad: European security. Indeed, according to Laderman and Simms, the “deadliest threat to European security...is Trump’s attitude to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization” (KL 231). Put another way, “the greatest threat to the international system...is not the wars that Mr. Trump could start, but the one he has already signaled that he might not fight, and thus will fail to deter” (KL 6959).

This is the origin of the Trump administration’s peculiar stance towards Russia. In Trump’s conceptual framework, Russia is not a revisionist power bent on subverting liberal order to expand its sphere of influence into the world’s richest geostrategic terrain. It is a relatively benign competitor, albeit one too poor to worry much about. Laderman and Simms predict a grand bargain in which the U.S. recognizes a revived Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, legitimizes Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and lifts sanctions in exchange for cooperation against the Islamic State.

It is uncertain how Trump’s foreign policy outlook and temperament will play out in the world more broadly. Although Laderman and Simms start off calling him a Jacksonian and an adherent of “protectionist isolationism,” much of their description does not support the “isolationist” label. Trump is better labeled a militarist: someone who does not shrink from getting involved abroad but, when doing so, relies almost exclusively on the military instrument.

Trump’s oft-repeated derision for “nation-building” fits in here—but so does his less well-known preference for air power over boots on the ground. Trump is a believer in the old (mostly discredited) view that strategic bombing and surgical air strikes should be enough to achieve America’s war aims. Laderman and Simms judge that “The US will step up the number of global snatch-squads in the war on terror, certainly, but it will cease to exercise a general superintendence over the defense of democracy and human rights.” Trump’s foreign policy will be “more nakedly imperialistic than humanitarian in nature” (KL 6887 and 6897).

However, that does not mean Trump will actually implement a foreign policy characterized by these ideas. Laderman and Simms caution—probably correctly—that Trump’s temperament might get in the way of Trump’s ideology. “The world is now at some risk of the president being tricked into hasty action by provocateurs,” they write (KL 6801). Even though Trump may be opposed to a broader military campaign in, say, Syria or North Korea, he might come to feel personally challenged if an initial round of bombing does not have his intended effect. Trump is not the first president to campaign against nation building, yet his predecessors sometimes found it impossible to avoid.

Laderman and Simms use Trump’s own remarks to present a damning critique. They are not alarmist—in contrast to some of Trump’s critics, Laderman and Simms insist that, “The United States is not about to turn fascist. Mr. Trump is unlikely seriously to assault the constitution, and if he does he will be repelled” (KL 6839). They note that some of Trump’s less appealing demagoguery, including his apparently xenophobic immigration policy, are of recent vintage. Unlike Trump’s beliefs about trade, Trump’s beliefs about immigration appear to be recently adopted for political convenience (he only started focusing on immigration around 2011), suggesting a greater chance that they will be moderated in the process of being translated into policy.

But their overall assessment could hardly be more challenging: “In short, by contrast with every single Democratic and Republican president since the Second World War, including George W. Bush, Trump rejects the international liberal order” (KL 198). Trump quite clearly does not believe in an open trading regime. He does not care about the spread or contraction of democracy or human rights abroad. He is not invested in the institutions of cooperative security that have anchored global peace for generations.

How far might American foreign policy change under Trump’s presidency? Laderman and Simms rightly point out that the American executive is least constrained in this field. They also argue that Trump has shown open contempt for the typical consensus-based decision-making of the national security establishment; he has boasted about being his own best advisor and, in his decades-long business career, does not have a track record of adjusting himself to his advisors’ input. A highly unusual chief executive operating from a nearly-unprecedented nationalist ideology in the field with the least number of checks on his power: this is a hard case for structural realism.

If, as seems likely, American foreign policy does show significant or unusual departures under the Trump presidency, scholars will have ample cause to continue investigating the influence of variables other than the structure of the international system on state behavior. In particular, Trump’s presidency raises the question about the influence of individual personality; ideology and belief systems; domestic culture, norms, and identity; and domestic institutions, including the media and the private sector. Theories that take these variables seriously seem better suited to account for the age of Trump.

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