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From [Salon](#) | Original Article

Trump's "America First" talk doesn't mean retrenchment. He just wants us to dominate everyone and rule the world



Donald Trump (Credit: Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

Donald Trump's inaugural address produced yet another torrent of commentary about his “populist, isolationist” ideology and what it means for the future of the republic and the world. Unfortunately, he is all about neither of those things.

It's true that he deployed the voice of a demagogue to rant about elites and powerful politicians and repeatedly evoked “the people.” But considering that his hires include six Goldman Sachs alums, three billionaires and several more vastly wealthy multimillionaires for his Cabinet, his alleged populism seems a bit strained. After all, to the extent the [hellscape he described in that speech exists](#), it was

created by the very people he is now empowering.

Calling Trump an isolationist rests mostly on his use of the archaic term “America First,” which was associated with attempts to keep America out of World War II (and also came with strong undercurrents of anti-Semitism.) But there is no evidence that Trump had a clue about that association when he started using the phrase.

Recall that when [journalist Michael Wolff interviewed him](#) in June, just before the big vote in the U.K., Trump clearly hadn’t heard of Brexit. Granted, he subsequently become fast friends with Brexit architect and right-wing provocateur Nigel Farage. But his idea of “isolationism” in this case is a simplistic belief that any nation “run by smart guys” can “make better deals” without having other countries represented at the table.

As far as security is concerned, [Trump’s threats to withdraw from NATO](#) and other alliances aren’t really about wanting to pull America to remain within its borders. He never says that. In fact, he wants [a huge military and wants to show it off](#) so everyone in the world will be in awe of American power. He just wants NATO and other alliances to pay protection money to the U.S. for whatever price he sets.

Trump has repeatedly made the fatuous claim that he’s going to make the military so massive that “no one will ever want to mess with us” but never has actually suggested that he would have any reluctance to use it. Indeed, [he’s made it clear that he intends to do just that](#), telling his rowdy crowds during the campaign:

ISIS is making a tremendous amount of money because of the oil that they took away, they have some in Syria, they have some in Iraq, I would bomb the shit out of them.

I would just bomb those suckers, and that’s right, I’d blow up the pipes. I’d blow up the refineries. I’d blow up ever single inch. There would be nothing left.

And you know what, you'll get Exxon to come in there, and in two months — you ever see these guys? How good they are, the great oil companies. They'll rebuild it brand new. . . . And I'll take the oil.

This has been his promise from Day One. Yesterday, press secretary Sean Spicer, reacting to Russian reports that the U.S. military was already engaged with Russia's forces in bombing Syria, offered up this startling answer:

Spicer: I know it's still developing and I would refer you back to the Department of Defense. I know that they're — they're currently monitoring this and I would refer you back to them on that. And I think . . .

Question: Generally open?

Spicer: I think, the president has been very clearly. [sic] He's gonna work with any country that shares our interest in defeating ISIS. Not just on the national security front, but on the economic front. If we can work with someone to create greater market access and spur economic growth and allow U.S. small businesses and companies to . . .

Question: [inaudible] to doing joint military actions with Russia in Syria?

Spicer: I — I think if there's a way that we can combat ISIS with any country, whether it's Russia or anyone else, and we have a shared national interest in that, sure we'll take it.

[The Pentagon adamantly denied](#) that the U.S. military was currently helping Russia in Syria, where the Russian military has been [accused by the U.N. of committing war crimes](#)

by using bunker-busting and incendiary bombs on civilian populations. Spicer didn't mention any of that, but Trump is undoubtedly unconcerned since his strategy is the same: “Bomb the shit out of them.”

As for “taking the oil,” which is a suggestion Trump has repeated for months (including as recently as Saturday when he told the CIA officials they “might get another chance at it”) even conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer was taken aback, correctly noting that “[seizing the oil is a war crime](#)”

If you have listened to Trump talk about China over the past 18 months, it is clear that he is not simply talking about a potential trade war but is prepared to confront the world’s largest nation militarily. In his confirmation hearings, secretary of state-designate Rex Tillerson made it clear that he agreed with Trump that the U.S. would not allow China to build military bases on islands in the South China Sea, and Spicer made that official yesterday:

I think the U.S. is going to make sure that we protect our interests there. If those islands are in fact in international waters and not part of China proper, then yes, we’re going to make sure that we defend international territories from being taken over by one country.

Does that sound like any definition of “isolationism” you’ve ever heard?

When Donald Trump says “America First,” he really means “We’re No. 1.” He talks incessantly about “winning,” so much we’ll be begging him to stop. He openly declares that he believes in the old saying “[to the victors belong the spoils](#),” either suggesting that he has no clue about the West’s colonial past and how that sounds to people around the world or simply doesn’t care. He’s not talking about isolationism but the exact opposite — American global dominance without all those messy institutions and international agreements standing in the way of taking what we want.

No, Trump is not an isolationist. He’s not a “realist.” Neither is he a liberal interventionist or a neoconservative idealist. He’s an old-fashioned imperialist. He wants to Make America great again by making it the world’s dominant superpower, capable of bullying other countries into submission and behaving however we like. He doesn’t seem to understand that the world won’t put up with that.

