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President Trump's praise for generals and promises of "military dominance" reflect militarism — the veneration of armies and the values of war for political ends.

## Trump isn't an isolationist. He's a militarist.

Under President Trump, American foreign policy is returning, many commentators say, to the isolationism that preceded World War II. This line of interpretation (and often attack) emerged during the election: While Hillary Clinton warned that her opponent would "tear up our alliances," an array of experts supplied such fears with a historical pedigree. As Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass put it, Trump stood for a "new isolationism," a revival of the 1930s dream of "turning away from global engagement."

The problem is, Trump isn't an isolationist. He is a militarist, something far worse. And calling Trump an isolationist isn't an effective critique.

The term "isolationism" was coined in the 1930s to caricature Americans who wanted to stay strictly neutral in the looming war. They scarcely sought to "disconnect from the world," as Vox's Zack Beauchamp recently wrote. In fact, most favored peaceful forms of overseas involvement, such as trade, and insisted on defending the Americas from foreign intervention — no small feat. What united them was their opposition to entering the Second World War after the devastation of the First. Judging the United States capable of repelling any outside invasion, they wanted to steer clear of armed entanglement in Europe and Asia. To breach this tradition would embroil Americans in "perpetual war for perpetual peace," in the words of historian and participant Charles Beard.

The first America Firsters, then, were anti-war more than anti-Semitic or pro-fascist, strains that recent critics of Trump overemphasize. True, the group's spokesman, aviator Charles Lindbergh, railed against "Jewish in-

Historian **Stephen Wertheim** says while critics worry about lack of global engagement, the president's true worldview is more frightening

fluence" months before Pearl Harbor. But the anti-Semitic diatribe crippled the movement rather than advancing it, and few America Firsters favored the Axis side. Rather, it was the antiwar appeal — the notion that involvement in European conflict was unnecessary for U.S. safety — that attracted millions across the political spectrum, including pacifist-socialist Norman Thomas and future presidents Gerald Ford and John F. Kennedy.

Of course, Pearl Harbor sealed their fate and launched the United States to global preeminence. Ever since, foreign policy elites have deployed the "isolationist" tag to expel anti-interventionists from the bounds of legitimate debate.

It's often an unfair label, but it's especially nonsensical when it comes to the current commander in chief: Trump is no isolationist, whether caricatured or actual. Rather than seeking to withdraw from the world, he vows to exploit it. Far from limiting the area of war, he threatens ruthless violence against globe-spanning adversaries and glorifies martial victory. In short, the president is a militarist.

Scholars define militarism, broadly, as the excessive use and veneration of force for political ends, or even for its own sake, extending at times to full military control of the state. (Trump has appointed two Marine generals, Jim Mattis and John F. Kelly, to his Cabinet.) Militarism, the pioneering historian Alfred Vagts wrote in 1937, promotes values "associated with armies and wars and yet transcending true military purposes." Militarism can be a policy and an ethos, corrupting the pursuit of rational goals.

Vagts, a former German army officer who fled the Nazis, wrote with his home country in mind. Scholars continue to locate militarism "over there" — in the Kaiser's Germany, the

Third Reich, imperial Japan and perhaps the Soviet empire. Only occasionally have they attributed militarism to the United States. That charge has been more likely to come from activists. In 1967, for instance, Martin Luther King Jr. decried the "militarism" of his government, ranking it with the evils of racism and poverty. Still, most Americans have seen their country as a force for peace, even when it goes to war.

Trump calls this assumption into question. Start with his baseline view of a world plagued by clashing civilizations and inescapable conflict. Trump rose to power by presenting a horror show of enemies, from Mexico to Iran to China to so-called radical Islamic terrorism (and sometimes Islam itself). Not even the European Union escapes Trump's zero-sum squint: He casts it as a German vehicle to "beat the United States on trade," not an effort to secure peace after two world wars. Peace, indeed, seems fragile and anomalous to Trump. "A lot of bad 'dudes' out there!" he summed up in a tweet.

Previous presidents — Theodore Roosevelt, Richard Nixon — have scorned non-Western cultures and accentuated divergent interests among states. But Trump is unique in seeing America as a victim nation, a net global loser that must now fight back. His single most consistent political conviction is that other countries have exploited the United States. In 1987, contemplating a presidential run, he took out a full-page newspaper ad accusing Japan, Saudi Arabia and other nations of "taking advantage" of American largesse. Last year, when he charged that China was committing "rape" and "theft" against the United States, the main novelty was that he'd updated his nemesis.

Trump's sense of abuse and humiliation is

potent. "The world is laughing at us," he endlessly repeats. It's a cry more common to revolutionary states and movements than to the world's sole superpower. Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany did not conquer territory for the thrill of it; their leaders acted out of perceived desperation, believing that they were losing a ruthless competition for power and status.

Facing a vicious world, Trump promises to turn the tables, not turn his back. He talks of grabbing wealth from other countries, most vividly in his mantra to "take the oil" in Iraq. "Maybe we'll have another chance," he said in a speech at the CIA. Trump may be posturing, but the posture is militaristic. To announce a lust for oil, to chest-thump about torture, to envisage military parades down Pennsylvania Avenue — these do not achieve strategic objectives so much as exalt brute force. "I'm the most militaristic person there is," Trump said in the primaries. Perhaps he was telling the truth.

Trump's cultural militarism bears watching, even if it never translates into foreign policy. Drawing a moral equivalence between the United States and Vladimir Putin's Russia, Trump rejects America's traditional identity as an exceptional nation shining the light of freedom to the world. What identity does he offer instead? While ignoring the Founding Fathers, he constantly invokes the "old days of General MacArthur and General Patton," the most extreme generals of the mid-20th century. In Trump's imagination, the generals demanded absolute victory, ensuring that "we never lost a war" before Vietnam. Trump's mythologizing recalls the veneration that imperial Germany bestowed upon its army, which had forged the nation by defeating France in 1871. MacArthur and Patton are Trump's new founders.

And Trump may not be posturing. He may pursue a program of intervention the world over. Tactics could begin with bluster and tariffs. Where they would end is anyone's guess, but Trump's disavowal of nation-building offers little comfort. His predecessors said the same during their presidential campaigns. Trump will avoid large-scale conflict only if he sets limited objectives and acts prudently.

Thus far, he has signaled the opposite. "Our military dominance must be unquestioned," the White House declared on Day One, and Trump plans to build up America's already supreme military. How will he use it? In his inaugural address, he pledged not only to take on "radical Islamic terrorism" but to "eradicate [it] from the face of the earth." Last year Trump's chief strategist, Stephen Bannon, professed "no doubt" that "we're going to war in the South China Sea in five to 10 years" — and that's on top of the "global war against Islamic fascism" that he believes to be in its opening stages.

The anti-Trump resistance may backfire without an adequate understanding of how the president and his voters see the world. When election commentators called Trump an isolationist, they affirmed precisely what made him popular enough to reach the White House: that he rejects the stale platitudes of elites. Worse, they placed him in an American tradition opposed to overseas conflict. It was a winning brand for a war-weary public, and Trump capitalized. He condemned the Iraq War at every turn and warned that his rivals would start "World War III."

When critics seem to assail Trump for being too peaceful, for questioning military alliances and hoping to cooperate with Russia, they reinforce his message. They verify that he's against not only the establishment but costly wars to boot. With spokesmen like these, who needs Kellyanne Conway? Better to call Trump the militarist he shows every indication of being. That's a brand he should fear: a peace candidate turned warmonger, a populist outsider serving arms dealers and autocrats.

Twitter: @StephenWertheim

Stephen Wertheim is a fellow in history at King's College, University of Cambridge, and is writing a book on the birth of American world leadership in World War II.