

# Trump and the Alt-Right (A View from Washington)

February 9, 2017



Donald Trump likes to think that he has not only won an election but “built a movement.” And to judge by his first week in the White House office, he has — just not in the way he thinks.

One day after the smallest public attendance at a presidential inauguration that anyone can remember, roughly a half million people turned out for the Women’s March on Washington to denounce Trump’s agenda of immigrant-bashing, misogyny, and attacks on reproductive rights. It was perhaps the largest protest since the antiwar rallies during George W. Bush’s second term, and a number of speakers expressed solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement against racist police violence. On the same day as the march, hundreds of “sister” events were held at the same time in cities throughout the United States and around the world (including Berlin, Munich, and Frankfurt) with estimates of up to 3 million participants in total.

In short, Donald Trump may well be on the way to inspiring a new mass radicalization on a scale that American leftists have only dreamt of in recent decades. In 2016, millions of first-time voters came out in support of Bernie Sanders, a Democratic Party candidate who identifies himself as a socialist and has called for “political revolution” — a concept left vaguely defined, to be sure, but one that resonates with a generation that has grown up with no reason to think that either the world’s economy or its environment can take much more of capitalism’s “invisible hand.”

\*\*

Just two months ago, the movement most associated with Trump’s name was the so-called “alt-right” of extreme reactionaries, including the neo-fascists who joined Richard Spencer in chanting “Hail Trump!” during a meeting of the National Policy Institute, a white supremacist “think tank.” Another leading alt-right figure, Trump’s campaign manager Stephen Bannon, now serves as the president’s Chief Strategist and Senior Counselor and has undoubtedly been the adviser urging Trump to think of his electoral success as proof that he is at the leader of a mass movement.

It is something Trump himself quite desperately wants to believe. Anyone paying attention to his campaign could see how deeply he craved the adulation of crowds that laughed, cheered, and expressed rage in time to his moods. Someone once called politics “show business for ugly people.” By that standard Trump is a star *ne plus ultra*.

But he is far from knowledgeable about affairs of state, much less about the complex ideological terrain of American conservatism. He enters office with a Congress dominated by a Republican party that — as one of its leading strategists put it — only needs the president to have enough fingers to sign the legislation it gives him. Trump qualifies in that regard, so the Republican establishment

thinks it can work with him. They can all agree on dismantling Obama's health-care reform, cutting taxes, privatizing public education, restricting the rights of women and LGBT people, and removing or preventing government regulation of the economy (especially of anything based on a recognition of man-made climate change), for example.

Most of this has been central to the Republican agenda for decades, along with support for military spending and an aggressive imperialist foreign policy. Carefully avoided, for the most part, is any explicit reference to race. The late Lee Atwater, an influential Republican figure, once explained that the old-fashioned race-baiting had become unpopular and ineffective, so the trick was to be more subtle. "So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff," he told a political scientist, "and you're getting so abstract. Now, you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites.... "We want to cut this," is much more abstract than even the busing thing, uh, and a hell of a lot more abstract than 'Nigger, nigger.'"

Trump's political ascent began with a variant on this tactic: he promoted the idea that Barack Obama could not prove that he was actually a U.S. citizen. But his campaign rhetoric against Mexican and Muslim immigrants was less "abstract" (to borrow Atwater's term) about appealing to racist sentiments. This proved embarrassing to Republican leaders, but they were hardly in the position of taking a principled stand against it. At the same time, a tension within the American right had intensified under the impact of the world economic crisis: Republican propaganda might celebrate the wealthy as "job creators," proclaim the virtues of small business ownership, and declare rural towns to be "the real America." But the policies they actually advanced (and that the Democratic party under Clinton and Obama largely supported) have heightened economic uncertainty and inequality to extremes not seen since the Great Depression.

Spencer, Bannon, and other alt-rightists understand their role as building up mechanisms of political and social authority over a population that will only grow more ethnically and cultural heterogeneous in the next two decades — while also being unlikely to recover its standard of living through the pure magic of the free market. They reject both neoliberalism and Atwater-style coyness about channeling racial hostilities.

Insofar as the conservative establishment has a body of ideas to shore it up, the influences come from a blend of Ayn Rand's celebration of "the virtue of selfishness" with a belief that God dictated the Constitution, or at least had a hand in the outline. By contrast, the more sophisticated of the alt-right strategists are acquainted with Alain de Benoist's ethnic communitarianism and Carl Schmitt's understanding of politics as defined by the sovereign's combat with an enemy. And they see most of the Republican leadership as being an enemy.

\*\*

Donald Trump is no doubt entirely innocent of such esoteric concepts. He spent his first week in a simmering rage over slights by the media and fuming from an awareness that he entered office with the lowest level of public confidence of any incoming president (only to lose another three points since then). But he sits astride the fault line between members of Congress who see themselves as Ronald Reagan's political heirs, on the one side, and those who share Bannon's aspiration to destroy the Republican party and replace it with something more vicious and brutal.

It is, in other words, a precarious and unstable conjuncture and one that can only grow more volatile as far-right campaigns mobilize elsewhere in the world. One thing that Marxists bring to the

situation is an understanding that capitalism's crises are always international — throwing down to us the challenge of finding ways to learn from and unify the forces from below that resist them. Millions of people in the United States are thinking about how to shut down Trump's assaults on vulnerable segments of the population. And seeing millions more around the world take to the street in solidarity can only help as we relearn the truth of the old Wobbly slogan: An Injury to One is an Injury to All.

\*Scott McLemee is a *New Politics* board member living in Washington, DC.

This article was written for the German magazine *Marx21* and will appear in the forthcoming issue.