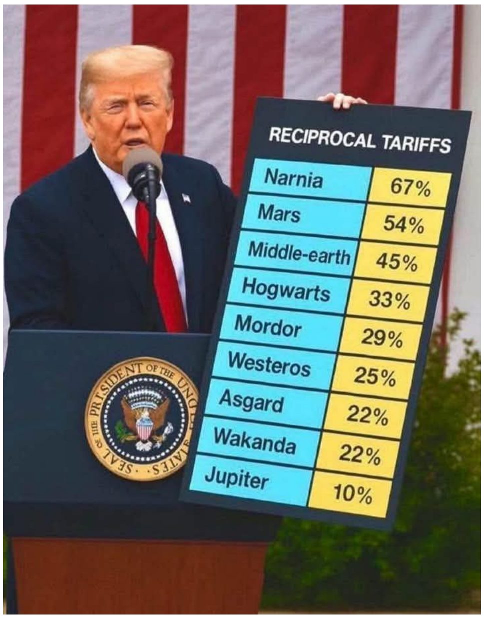
# Trump Tariffs and U.S. Imperialism

written by Gillian Hart | May 26, 2025




This spoof image found on Facebook, based on Trump's "Liberation Day" presentation of new U.S. tariffs, only spplying them to other-worldly places, captures the sense of astonishment in the public as he announced them, and then post-poned them, them, and then restored them, and then….

Trump's April 2025 tariff blitz ignited market chaos and deepened rifts within his own coalition. Beneath the turmoil lies a battle between technocrats, ultranationalists, and anti-imperial populists, all vying to reshape—or destroy—American global power.

On April 2, 2025, Donald Trump declared a "Day of Liberation" and slapped massive tariffs on most countries—excluding Russia but including a 50% tariff on Lesotho. The standard Left argument is that Trump's tariffs represent capital's warfare against the working class in response to the crisis of global capitalism. Of course, there's some validity to that view, but it tends to operate at an excessively high level of abstraction.

More immediately, it doesn't explain the ferocious backlash to tariffs from multiple fractions of capital, both within and beyond the Trump coalition. After the tariff tsunami, Elon Musk called Trump's economic advisor Peter Navarro "a moron and dumber than a sack of bricks." Meanwhile, liberal mainstream media outlets screamed bloody murder, portraying Trump not only as dumb but deranged. The frenzy only intensified when the stock market meltdown carried over into the bond market, which, as financial orthodoxy tells us, isn't supposed to happen.

Trump responded by postponing most of the tariffs for 90 days, even as he ramped up the trade war with China. In just over a week, Wall Street went ballistic, the dollar rapidly devalued, Trump's approval ratings tanked, and much of the Republican Party—and key fractions of capital—went into panic mode, even as they remained terrified of crossing him. These dynamics remain ongoing.

Trump's tariffs are not merely erratic protectionist gestures. Rather, they form part of a blunt and confused arsenal aimed at dismantling post-Second World War US imperialism and replacing it with a brutal new form of nationalist global domination—one stripped of the trappings of "soft power" such as USAID. This multi-sided project emerges from factions within the New MAGA Coalition, and takes different—and often contradictory—forms.

Understanding these contradictions in their specificity is essential, not just for critique but for posing questions about new possibilities for organizing and alliance-building—not only in South Africa, but working towards a concrete internationalism, a topic to which we'll return later.

**The new MAGA coalition**

So, what is this New MAGA Coalition behind Trump 2.0? First, it includes fractions of capital that extend well beyond those who underwrote Trump 1.0—most notably Elon Musk and the South African "PayPal mafia," along with the tech broligarchy so grotesquely on display at the inauguration: Zuckerberg, Bezos, and other billionaires.

It also encompasses elements of the petty bourgeoisie and working class that go beyond Trump's earlier mostly white cross-class base, as the late Mike Davis described in *Catalyst* in 2017. Most notably, sizable Latino communities in some US regions have come to identify with MAGA—vividly documented by Paola Ramos in her recent book on the Latino far right. Another notable addition in 2024: disaffected, mainly young Black men who joined the MAGA coalition.

What knits this awkward coalition together is a powerful anti-woke sentiment and a ferocious opposition to liberal DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) initiatives that proliferated after the nationwide Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020. David Walsh describes "woke" as a "catch-all specter that could variously connote the ravages of state planning, the anarchism of street protests, or the godlessness of modern secular society—not an empty vessel, exactly, but a foil and common enemy against which a political coalition of often diametrically opposed interests could congeal," as he writes in *Boston Review*.

Also traveling under the anti-woke banner is unfiltered racism, patriarchy, and vicious heteronormativity—especially targeting trans people—all of which underscore the limits of elitist liberalism, as discussed on *The Dig*. These brutalities are now wrapped in a (mostly white) Christian Nationalist package that stretches back to Trump 1.0, but is being significantly re-elaborated in Trump 2.0.

What also distinguishes Trump 2.0 is its rooting in a far more coordinated and organized project of dismantling and privatizing the state, one that's been in formation for several years. Its blueprint is a 920-page document titled "Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise," published in 2023 by the Heritage Foundation. It has come to be known as Project 2025: Presidential Transition Project.

During the campaign, Trump denied having read it (probably true), but the steaming pile of executive orders he gleefully signed post-inauguration came straight out of it and continues to do so. Unlike Trump 1.0, Trump 2.0 has determined and coherent operatives behind it. They're driving the juggernaut of destruction—most notably Russell Vought, head of the powerful Office of Management and Budget—despite the clown-car nature of most of Trump's cabinet. Even if Musk were to depart for Mars brandishing his chainsaw, the scaffolding of Project 2025 appears firmly in place, at least on the surface.

But look a little closer and you'll find that this scaffolding had a fatal weakness from the start. Scroll down to Chapter 26 on trade, and two sharply opposed visions emerge.

In the section on "fair trade," Navarro—Trump's key pro-tariff advisor in both administrations—concludes that "America gets fleeced every day in the global marketplace, both by a predatory Communist China and by an institutionally unfair and nonreciprocal WTO." Focusing on the large trade deficit by which the US imports significantly more than it exports, he asks: "Might

America even lose a broader hot war because it sent its defense industrial base abroad on the wings of a persistent trade deficit?" The answer, for Navarro, is clear: tariffs are imperative to "restore American greatness, both economically and militarily," by bringing manufacturing back home.

In the opposing section, "The Case for Free Trade," Kent Lassman presents the classic conservative argument against protectionism. Declaring that "American manufacturing is currently at an all-time high," he slams tariffs as a lose-lose-lose scenario: the tariff raiser loses access to affordable goods, the target country loses export markets, and retaliatory tariffs punish the instigator yet again. He also warns of the hidden costs of tariff dodging. For Lassman, recent departures from free trade have damaged the US economy and "weakened alliances that are necessary to contain threats from Russia and China." He calls for reaffirming "openness, dynamism, and free trade" as the pillars of continued US dominance into the next century.

These splits and contradictions have carried over into the tariff wars erupting within the MAGA coalition itself. There are now two distinct pro-tariff projects, both aimed at reconfiguring US imperialism. One is the so-called Mar-a-Lago Accord, led by Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent. The other is a far more radical vision pursued by Steve Bannon and the wide array of popular forces he continues to mobilize.

Before unpacking these competing projects and their wider implications, it's important to sketch briefly the key contours of US imperialism. The main pillars of American global power are a specific configuration of finance capital—with the US dollar as global reserve currency—backed by overwhelming military force.

Because key commodities such as oil and gold are priced in US dollars, all countries must hold dollars. Small open economies like South Africa operate at a distinct disadvantage. Meanwhile, the US can accumulate massive debt by issuing Treasury Bonds—a privilege no other country enjoys. Since the end of the Cold War, the US has spent over $30 trillion more than it has taken in.

China has played a key role in underwriting this system, using export earnings to purchase US debt, thereby lowering the cost of borrowing. At the same time, shrinking employment, stagnant wages, and rising inequality since the 1980s pushed much of the US population into a frenzy of consumption and spiraling personal debt. This dynamic relies on large trade deficits—precisely what significant factions of the MAGA coalition see as the greatest threat to American power.

Back in 2019, historian Adam Tooze asked, "Is this the end of the American Century?" His answer: not quite. Financial and military power remained intact. But what had collapsed was any claim that American democracy could serve as a political model. What we were facing, he wrote, was "a radical disjunction between the continuity of basic structures of power and their political legitimation." When Joe Biden took office in 2021, he sought to resuscitate the liberal international order—an order whose cruel hypocrisies are now starkly exposed in US support for Israel's war on Gaza, as Adam Hanieh has brilliantly analyzed. Trump 2.0, through its tariffs and trade wars, is in effect attacking the financial pillar of US global power with a sledgehammer—even if this is not quite what some of his pro-tariff advisors intended.

**Tariffing the end of empire?**

Unlike Navarro and others who see the trade deficit as the central existential threat to the US, the authors of the so-called Mar-a-Lago Accord are primarily concerned with what they regard as the gross overvaluation of the dollar. Their aim, per a *New York Times* report, is to use:

> **tariffs and other strong-arm tactics to force the world to take a radical step:**

**weakening the dollar via currency agreements. This devaluation, the theory goes, would make US exports more competitive, put pressure on China, and increase manufacturing in the United States.**

In addition to Treasury Secretary Bessent, a key figure is Stephen Miran, who Trump appointed as Chair of the Council of Economic Advisors in March 2025. Just after the 2024 election, Miran published "A User's Guide to Restructuring the Global Trading System." In dense, economistic language that Trump has almost certainly never read, the 41-page document lays out the justifications and strategies for devaluing the dollar using threats of tariffs and defense pact withdrawals—country by country.

In short, Bessent and Miran envisage tariffs as part of a coercive negotiation strategy: to pressure countries into raising their currency values relative to the dollar, and to relocate key industries to the US. These include sectors deemed vital to national security, such as semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, and military equipment. While the "User's Guide" insists the dollar must remain the dominant currency, it also acknowledges growing efforts to find alternatives, such as the Chinese renminbi or a potential BRICS currency. Though such efforts are deemed doomed to fail, Miran asserts, "alternative reserve assets like gold or cryptocurrencies will likely benefit."

The Mar-a-Lago Accord, when read alongside the "User's Guide," affirms the substantial advantages of the US's reserve currency status—cheap borrowing and global power projection among them. But it argues that the costs are now outweighing the benefits. "As the economic burdens on America grow with global GDP outpacing American GDP," Miran writes, "America finds it more difficult to underwrite global security, because the current account deficit grows and our ability to produce equipment becomes hollowed out." Hence, the push for policies that "recapture some of the benefit our reserve provision conveys to trading partners and connect this economic burden sharing with defense burden sharing."

Even so, the "User's Guide" issues a sharp warning against disruption and volatility: "There is a path by which the Trump Administration can reconfigure the global trading and financial systems to America's benefit, but it is narrow, and will require careful planning, precise execution, and attention to steps to minimize adverse consequences."

Naturally, the preposterous tariffs that Trump unveiled on April 2 (reputedly dreamed up by Navarro) run directly counter to these cautious recommendations—leaving Bessent and Miran to bluster about the President's "extraordinary negotiating skills." As the markets melted down and Trump threatened to sack the chair of the Federal Reserve while ramping up attacks on China, Bessent increasingly found himself in the awkward position of having to leash the rampaging orange bulldog.

In the ensuing economic, political, and military chaos, the technocratic pipe dream of an orderly reconfiguration of US imperial power has imploded, leaving the remains of the Mar-a-Lago Accord scattered across the manicured grounds of the White House. What persists, however, is a hard core of MAGA support for a far more radical popular project: one aimed at dismantling US imperialism as we've known it.

### Nationalist-populist opposition to US Empire

In a striking profile from October 2024, James Pogue shows how Stephen Bannon "has turned his immensely influential *War Room* show … into a cross between a daily troop muster and a policy training school, which he uses to tutor millions of "peasants," as he likes to phrase his target demographic, on how this global power structure actually functions."

He quotes Bannon insisting, "To be serious, you've got to be anti-imperial." People are waking up, he claims: "Once you talk about how the system is financed, they are fucking furious. A working-class audience can understand that something's not right with the system, but they can't put their finger on it." Calling his listeners "the army of the awakened," Bannon has made it his mission to lay it all bare, Pogue reports.

Before unpacking the substance of this anti-imperialism, some context matters. Bannon is not best understood as a singular "great man" but as a figurehead within a global network of right-wing Christian nationalist forces, rooted in the US and deeply embedded in the MAGA bloc. He's also closely allied with Peter Navarro—both were jailed in 2024 for contempt after refusing to testify in the January 6 congressional inquiry. While Navarro maintains Trump's ear despite mockery from parts of MAGA, Bannon is far more articulate and intellectually potent, and actively shapes the movement's populist base.

In an article from 2020, I outlined how Bannon was instrumental in constructing the popular forces that helped propel Trump's 2016 victory. First, he hijacked the anti-Obama Tea Party from the Koch brothers and delivered it to Trump. Second, he played a major role in stoking backlash to bipartisan immigration reform efforts in 2013—linking xenophobia to anti-trade sentiment and mobilizing it before these issues had fully entered the political mainstream. In a 2017 interview, Bannon recalled saying:

> **I said, look, trade is number 100 on the list of issues, nobody ever talks about it, and immigration is like two or three, but if we ran a campaign that really focused on the economic issues in this country and really got people to understand how trade is so important, and immigration are inextricably linked … we could really set this thing on fire.**

Trump, he claims, became the mouthpiece for these ideas by "[deploying] a very plain-spoken vernacular."

Third, Bannon seized control of key media outlets—including *Breitbart News*, massively funded by the Mercer family—which he used to destroy enemies both inside and outside the GOP, while pushing his conservative, anti-globalist, traditionalist nationalism. By the 2016 election, Breitbart had far outstripped Fox News, dominating the right-wing media ecosystem. Today, Bannon reportedly believes he wields more power through *War Room* than he ever did as Trump's campaign architect or White House strategist.

The "anti-imperial common sense" Bannon communicates to his "peasant" audience includes—but far exceeds—Navarro's tariffs, which he supports. It also goes well beyond the Mar-a-Lago Accord. Rather than merely twisting global systems of finance and military power in America's favor, Bannon and his fellow hyper-nationalists seek to obliterate altogether the post-1980s form of US imperialism.

What exactly does this anti-imperialism consist of? It has a solid—and glittering—material base. Bannon's worldview is reportedly detailed in a multi-volume report titled *The End of the Dollar Empire*, available only via the Birch Gold Group, a firm that offers not just a gold-backed ETF but actual physical gold. Downloading the report requires entanglement with Birch Gold, so I passed. But listening to *War Room* podcasts, one can't miss the constant exhortations to secure your IRA with Birch Gold in anticipation of a dollar collapse.

Bannon isn't focused on trade deficits or dollar valuation alone. He's obsessed with the entire dollar-based global order. As Pogue notes, it creates a perverse military incentive: "It lets us finance huge expenditures on hypercomplex weapons and allows us to toss off hundreds of billions of dollars to support Ukraine's and Israel's wars"—even as it hollows out America's ability to manufacture basic war matériel. Biden's attempt to weaponize the dollar during the Ukraine war failed to crush the ruble, and raised a new alarm: that others might now see it's possible to abandon the dollar entirely.

Pogue also interviews Samuel Finlay of the IM-1776 project, whose views align with Bannon's. Finlay emphasizes "rootedness" and "tradition," which he connects to a hatred of global capital and resistance to the military-industrial complex—a position that directly contradicts decades of Republican orthodoxy. People like Finlay, Pogue writes, have come to the same "awakening" Bannon is fomenting: that the system has betrayed those who believed in and served it—leaving them with NAFTA, fentanyl, and an elite that views their values as backward and dangerous.

*War Room* weaves these insights into a broader narrative. Disaffected veterans and others are fed a critique of "the lords of Wall Street" and "the apartheid state of Silicon Valley." The message: elites own everything and have sold out to the Chinese Communist Party—thus funding the very forces attacking America. According to Bannon, we are now in a "Time of War," one that dwarfs debates over trade, inflation, or price hikes.

So, how do the wild gyrations of post–Liberation Day fit into the Bannon-Navarro worldview? From their perspective, the unraveling of the "Dollar Empire" since April 2 looks like progress. As Pogue notes, Bannon and fellow populists across the West have come to embrace a multipolar world modeled on Russia's strategic vision—one that displaces the American-led order Bannon believes has ravaged the US. On an April 25 episode of *War Room Battleground*, Bannon claimed that we are "moving toward a new geopolitics of blocs."

Yet the very Americans Bannon sees as crushed by the Dollar Empire are also most exposed to its chaotic dismantling. First, prices for the cheap imports that sustain the US economy—and low-income Americans in particular—are spiking. Second, as the dollar declines as reserve currency, government spending will be slashed. And who bears that burden? Early signs include proposals to gut Medicaid to help fund tax breaks for the rich. Third, rising automation will sharply undermine promises that reindustrialization will yield secure, high-wage jobs and revive devastated regions.

In short, the idea that a protectionist, isolationist, national capitalism—mashing up xenophobia, anti-globalism, Christian nationalism, and anti-elite rage—can deliver liberation is just as much of a pipedream as the Mar-a-Lago Accord.

Which brings me back to the central claim: understanding Trump's tariffs as blunt weapons aimed at either reconfiguring or shattering US empire matters deeply for the Left, both in the US and globally. What we need is not nostalgia for the collapsing liberal order, nor Kamala-style "politics of joy" in the face of atrocities in Gaza. Instead, we need what Stefan Kipfer calls "concrete internationalism." He develops the analysis with reference to current conditions in Canada, but with much broader transnational relevance. Distinguishing between nationalism and national-popular democratic projects, he insists that "left national-popular projects can offer alternatives to nationalism only if they are components within larger internationalist strategies" that reject the tendency of all nationalisms "to demote emancipatory social questions of class, gender, and race." In South Africa, we are, of course, sharply aware of these dangers.

Trump's tariff debacle and the ensuing meltdown have exposed the fragilities of the liberal international order, the absurdities and devastations of global capitalist dynamics, and the dangers of resurgent nationalisms and forms of fascism. Grappling with the limits and contradictions of a Bannonite “anti-imperial common sense” can help, I hope, to make space not only for protest and resistance, but also for envisaging and building toward a very different project of concrete socialist internationalism.