

Trump First, America Second

by Riccardo Alcaro

In his inaugural address to a nation half-enthusiastic and half-stunned still by the most extraordinary political comeback in US history, Donald Trump portrayed himself as the saviour of the nation, chosen by God Himself to finally turn America First from slogan to reality and truly 'make America great again'.¹ The mixture of politics, ideology and megalomaniac eschatology is especially interesting because Trump has tied the fate of the nation to his personal fortunes like no other president before him. As he puts it, the realisation of America First is inextricably linked to his personal power.

America First in practice

The nature of America First as an ideological and political platform can be told through many categories,

¹ White House, *The Inaugural Address*, 20 January 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address>.

most of them ending in 'ism'. The first is *declinism*, the idea that the United States is mired in moral and political decadence. That such decline is illusory – in spite of the 2021-23 inflation spike, the United States is coming off four years of sustained economic growth and unemployment near or at record lows, continues to be the hotbed of technological innovation and possesses unrivalled military superiority – is immaterial.² What counts is to intercept and foment the perception of a decline in mores and establish a link

² Alicia Wallace, "Biden's Economic Legacy: Historic Wage Gains, Investment and Jobs Growth but Marred by Inflation", in *CNN*, 19 January 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/19/economy/us-biden-economic-legacy/index.html>; Edward Longe and Turner Loesel, "The United States Is the Leader of the Digital Revolution – Pro-Tech Policies Are Key", in *James Madison Institute Articles*, 12 April 2024, <https://jamesmadison.org/the-united-states-is-the-leader-of-the-digital-revolution-pro-tech-policies-are-key>; Global Firepower website: *2025 Military Strength Ranking*, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php>.

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between national rebirth and Trump's leadership.

America First is also about *nativism*, the unification of nation and borders, with the latter construed as a wall protecting Americans from the crime and corruption that migrants, especially irregular ones, inevitably bring with them. It is on the border that Trump has built his political fortune, so it is not surprising that on inauguration day he promised, amongst others, to send troops to the border, deport millions of undocumented immigrants, remove foreigners from countries considered enemies using a forgotten law from 1798 (the Alien Enemies Act), and abolish by presidential fiat birthright citizenship for children born to foreign parents even if it is enshrined in the Constitution.³

Linked to nativism is *Christian nationalism*, centred on the belief that state action should reflect the indissoluble bond between the American nation and the Christian religion. Religion has always had a

³ White House, *Clarifying the Military's Role in Protecting the Territorial Integrity of the United States. Executive Order*, 20 January 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/clarifying-the-militarys-role-in-protecting-the-territorial-integrity-of-the-united-states>; *Realigning the United States Refugee Admissions Program. Executive Order*, 20 January 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/realigning-the-united-states-refugee-admissions-program>; George Fishman, *Trump Prepares to Use the Alien Enemies Act*, Center for Immigration Studies, 21 January 2025, <https://cis.org/node/14881>; White House, *Protecting the Meaning and Value of American Citizenship. Executive Order*, 20 January 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/protecting-the-meaning-and-value-of-american-citizenship>.

greater role in US politics than in most Western democracies, and yet America has historically been a promoter of the separation of state and church.⁴ In Trump's America First vision, the border is blurred. The president moved seamlessly from declaring that his administration would not "forget God" to stating that it would make it official US policy that there are only two genders – an issue part of the Christian electorate is extremely sensitive to, although admittedly shared by many others too (including on the left).

Also rooted in Christian nationalism were Trump's attacks against the education system, which he accused of teaching students to "hate their country" for daring to include in school curricula such issues as the dispossession of the native tribes and slavery. Trump's re-exhumation of Manifest Destiny, the 19th-century construction of America's westward expansion (but also to Cuba and the Philippines) as divine design, equally descends from that ideological framework.⁵ While limited to the Panama Canal and perhaps Greenland, *territorial expansionism* is now back into a presidential agenda after over a century during which it had been consigned to history as an illegitimate practice of the past.

In foreign policy, America First is especially about *protectionism* and

⁴ Interfaith Alliance, *A Concise Introduction to Christian Nationalism*, 29 September 2022, https://interfaithalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/InterfaithAlliance-A_Concise_Primer_on_Christian_Nationalism.pdf.

⁵ Jeanne T. Heidler and David S. Heidler, "Manifest Destiny. United States History", in *Britannica*, 23 January 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Manifest-Destiny>.

unilateralism, mixed with a dose of *non-interventionist cynicism*. Trump views the world as an arena where ever transient deals between great powers replace multilateral institutions (such as the Paris Accord on climate or the World Health Organisation, from which he has withdrawn the United States) and alliances like NATO are downgraded to client networks. In this regard, tariffs are not so much a tool to defend domestic industry as a lever to discipline clients and compete with rivals. America First means reinforcing US primacy without this entailing diplomatic and military commitments, which is why Trump seeks a balance of power without much regard for international law and the states caught in the middle.

Even *oligopoly*, a term historically associated with the robber barons era of the early 1900s, is not incompatible with America First if it involves securing an unassailable technology edge. Before and even more after the election, the *crème de la crème* of America's tech sector, starting with X, Tesla, Space X and Starlink owner Elon Musk, rushed to Mar-à-Lago, Trump's personal residence in Florida to pay homage to their new overlord.⁶ What Musk and his fellow tech industry captains – from Meta's Mark Zuckerberg to Amazon's Jeff Bezos, OpenAI's Sam Altman and Palantir's Peter Thiel, and others still – expect is massive tax cuts and deregulation on steroids.

⁶ Damon Beres, "Billions of People in the Palm of Trump's Hand", in *The Atlantic*, 20 January 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2025/01/trump-musk-zuckerberg-silicon-valley-kisses-the-ring/681384>.

What Trump wants in return is loyalty, starting with getting rid of all content moderation and fact-checking on social media (he has been obliged already by X and Meta).⁷ This is presented in the form of *libertarianism*, the liberation of individuals and companies from the shackles of an oppressive government, which also justifies, in a single stroke, Trump's announced boost to the fossil fuels industry (free of climate-sensitive regulations) and support for unchecked and unregulated cryptocurrencies. But libertarianism does not tell the full story of Trump's plans, which are less about liberation from the state than the capture of it. Here is where the personal agenda lying in the shadow of America First, which is arguably the greatest novelty compared to Trump's first term, comes to the fore.

Trump First in practice

Contrary to 2017, when he was catapulted onto the White House to general surprise (including his own), this time Trump comes to power on the back of an organised machine, partly built by the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025.⁸

Trump feels that the federal bureaucracy and the Republican establishment thwarted him during his first term. He has therefore made loyalty the main criterion guiding his appointments to key positions in the cabinet and the administration

⁷ Adam Kovacevich, "How to Make Sense of Tech Making Nice with Trump", in *CEPA Articles*, 21 January 2025, <https://cepa.org/?p=36531>.

⁸ Heritage Foundation, *About Project 2025*, last updated 30 September 2024, <https://www.project2025.org/about/about-project-2025>.

at large. Trump wants to subdue, in particular, the government agencies that in his view make up the hated 'deep state': the military, the intelligence community, the Justice Department and law enforcement, the lead of which he has assigned to loyalists, even if they have no institutional pedigree, lack qualifications for the job or hold controversial positions.⁹ This explains the choice of an anti-woke warrior and Fox TV host as secretary of defence (Pete Hegseth), an ex-Democrat with pro-Russian sympathies as director of national intelligence (Tulsi Gabbard), a conspiracist as head of the FBI (Kash Patel), and his former lawyer as attorney general (Pam Bondi).¹⁰

It is no coincidence that one of the executive orders Trump signed on his first day in office instructed his attorney general and director of national intelligence to provide him with a report on the alleged "weaponisation of government" by the Biden administration, which is how he sees or pretends to see any legal and administrative action targeting his

conduct and that of his supporters.¹¹ Thanks to an obscure legal device which Joe Biden had revoked and he has promptly reinstated, the infamous Schedule F, Trump will be legally entitled to replace non-aligned officials with loyalists.¹²

All this raises legitimate concerns that the government machine will be used – this time for real – to punish political foes and intimidate the media. This is the backdrop of President Biden's preventive pardons not just of his son Hunter, but of many who have come in Trump's crosshairs, from former Republican Congresswoman Liz Cheney (guilty of joining the January 6 House Committee) to former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley (who has once described Trump as a fascist).¹³

In so doing, Biden has protected them from prosecution but indirectly supported Trump's allegations (pardons imply admission of guilt). At any rate, Biden could not provide protection to hundreds of other people who could fall victim to Trump's whims. Punishment is a goal, but intimidation is equally

⁹ James Politi et al., "Donald Trump vs the 'Deep State': President's Vendetta Agenda Takes Shape", in *Financial Times*, 22 January 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/cfe4f220-23c2-40a7-b3aa-da9eba080ee1>.

¹⁰ Amy Tikkanen, "Pete Hegseth", in *Britannica*, last updated 23 January 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pete-Hegseth>; Amy Tikkanen, "Tulsi Gabbard", in *Britannica*, last updated 21 January 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tulsi-Gabbard>; "Kash Patel", in *Britannica*, last updated 22 January 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kash-Patel>; Alanna Durkin Richer, "Who Is Trump's Attorney General Pick Pam Bondi? The Former Prosecutor Is a Close Trump Ally", in *AP News*, 15 January 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/4b94c094cfcabf606e4883fe709ab55a>.

¹¹ White House, *Ending the Weaponization of Government. Executive Order*, 20 January 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-the-weaponization-of-the-federal-government>.

¹² White House, *Executive Order on Creating Schedule F in the Excepted Service*, 21 October 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-creating-schedule-f-excepted-service>.

¹³ Peter Baker and Michael D. Shear, "Biden in Final Hours Pardons Relatives and Others to Thwart Trump Reprisals", in *The New York Times*, 20 January 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/20/us/politics/biden-pardons-fauci-milley-cheney-jan-6.html>.

important. It may not be necessary to resort to prosecution or formal censure. Non-criminal investigations, tax audits, the revoking of security clearances (or details), the withdrawal of libels as well as hate campaigns on unmoderated social platforms might be more than enough, given the legal costs and psychological pressure that the targets are forced to endure. In this sense, America First is characterised by a soft form of *authoritarianism*, though some fear worse.¹⁴

Arguably, the most earthshaking decision taken by Trump on his inaugural day has been the pardons and commutation of sentence for those convicted for assaulting Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021.¹⁵ In Trump's eyes, these people did not try to violently subvert the peaceful transition of power after a regularly held democratic election. On the contrary, they committed the ultimate act of loyalty: they put him above the law and the constitutional order. For America First means, first and foremost, Trump First.

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¹⁴ Robert Kagan, "A Trump Dictatorship Is Increasingly Inevitable. We Should Stop Pretending", in *The Washington Post*, 30 November 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/11/30/trump-dictator-2024-election-robert-kagan>.

¹⁵ White House, *Granting Pardons and Commutation of Sentences for Certain Offenses Relating to the Events at or near the United States Capital on January 6, 2021*, 20 January 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/granting-pardons-and-commutation-of-sentences-for-certain-offenses-relating-to-the-events-at-or-near-the-united-states-capitol-on-january-6-2021>.

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