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Renegotiating the Realm of Influence: The Shifting Priorities of President Trump during NAFTA Renegotiations

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The politics of the President of the United States, Donald Trump, has oscillated between the outward expression of promoting United States (US) economic prosperity and an antagonistic populism that seeks to isolate him and his followers from established political norms. This has recently manifested in the interrelations between domestic influence and foreign policy. Acting upon a campaign promise to enter into a renegotiation with Canada and Mexico of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), driven by a perception that this could improve economic outcomes for the US, the Trump Administration began to establish strategic objectives to bring to the negotiating table. While the priorities stated by the Administration displayed a moderate and sound strategy in line with contemporary economists, a shift in policy preference occurred once the renegotiation of the agreement began. The Trump negotiating team moved toward a decidedly more nationalist posture.

This article examines the factors that caused that drastic shift in international trade policy. First, it addresses the corporate interests that established significant influence on the White House. Second, it assesses the moderating influence on trade policy that

followed from this corporate access. Third, it analyzes the rationale behind the imbedded corporate interests in trade policy and the importance of NAFTA to influential American businesses. A contextual analysis follows concerning the President's comments about the 2017 Charlottesville, Virginia protests and how they affected corporate influence in the White House. Next, this essay examines the effects of the dissolution of access first granted to corporate interests, followed by an analysis of populist nationalism and its impact on the Administration's trade negotiations. Finally, the implications of these findings on US foreign policy and international relations is considered.

Upon entering the Oval Office, President Trump established economic advisory councils replete with private-sector expertise. One such council, the Strategic and Policy Forum, contained a multitude of CEOs with the objective of advising the President "on how government policy impacts economic growth, job creation, and productivity" (Blackstone 2016). Similarly, the President instituted a Manufacturing Jobs Initiative, which sought input from CEOs on government policy and regulations with the objective to "promote job growth and get Americans back to work again" (White House 2017b). Upon being appointed chairman of the manufacturing council, Dow Chemical CEO Andrew Liveris was optimistic that the Trump Administration was "not going to do anything to harm competitiveness" (quoted in Meyersohn 2017). While ostensibly the councils were established to ensure that economic policy aligned with the interests of American businesses, their ability to increase job growth and competitiveness hinged on access to the White House. During preparations for the renegotiation of NAFTA, the influence of business interests within the councils seemed to deliver a moderating effect on the policy of

the Trump Administration, which began by seeking trade reforms consistent with internationalist economic perspectives.

Before the Trump Administration began the process of renegotiations with Canadian and Mexican officials, it developed strategic approaches and objectives for the international meetings. As NAFTA had not been updated in the more than two decades, its provisions were in need of adjustment, according to many economists and scholars.¹ The original negotiating points set out by the Trump Administration seemed to reflect this. There was a reluctance to simply reject the agreement, as had been done with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (Irwin 2017, 45). In his report to Congress, Robert Lighthizer (2017), the United States Trade Representative (USTR) for the NAFTA renegotiations, outlined a modernization strategy to address digital trade, intellectual property, labor, and environmental standards. These renegotiation policy objectives were not a significant departure from those that economic commentators had articulated over the course of the agreement's implementation; indeed, the approach taken was notably similar to provisions within the proposed TPP (Palmer, Behsudi, and Cassella 2017). This suggests that the business interests invited to advise the White House on economic policy initially established a significant influence on international trade issues (Neal and Pascrell 2017). The congruence between the initial renegotiation provisions, concerns of previous US administrations and various expert opinions suggests

¹ For recommended reforms to NAFTA see, for example, Hufbauer and Schott (2005), Leblond and Fabian (2017), Schoen (1999), or Smillie (2017).

that Trump's populist campaign rhetoric was initially influenced by corporate interests. These interests were afforded access to decision-makers through the Strategic and Policy Forum and Manufacturing Jobs Initiative advisory councils, which gave them an ability to impact policy formulation.

The two advisory councils consisted primarily of CEOs from the most profitable and influential corporations in the US, and while their interests differed on many policy issues, a significant number of their members benefit from and support the notion of a North American free-trade zone.² Members of the Strategic and Policy Forum involved with manufacturing, such as General Motors (GM) and General Electric (GE), have a preference for free-trade policies, especially within the North American market. With a former CEO on the Strategic and Policy Forum and the current CEO on the Manufacturing Jobs Initiative council, GE has been a supportive voice for NAFTA renegotiations as a modernization attempt (Graham 2017). The position held by GE was likely influential; its public positions on NAFTA were consistent with the renegotiation objectives presented in Lighthizer's letter to Congress, which highlighted the need for reforms in digital trade and intellectual

² Among the members of the economic advisory councils are financial and manufacturing firms that are involved in transnational production in North America and have made statements in support of NAFTA; others which neither benefit nor are disadvantaged by international trade have mostly remained silent on the issue. The major exception is labor. The AFL-CIO and the Alliance for American Manufacturing, both represented on the Manufacturing Jobs Initiative, have voiced concerns about lower wages and working standards in Mexico and insufficient rules of origin to promote US manufacturing, respectively (Trumka 2017; Paul 2017).

property (General Electric Company 2017; Lighthizer 2017). Similarly, GM CEO and Strategic and Policy Forum member Mary Barra was critical of intentions to impose tariffs on continental trade (Gardner 2017). Several investment and consulting firms involved in the councils had produced reports noting the disruption an abandonment of NAFTA would cause, while also inferring the need to modernize the agreement (EY 2017; Wien 2017; Boston Consulting Group 2017). During interviews in April of 2017, CEOs on the Strategic and Policy Forum reported that the President was actively listening to the councils and taking industry advice into consideration when formulating policy (Kelly 2017b). The diminished rhetoric threatening to nullify NAFTA can be attributed to these corporate interests (Kelly 2017a). However, as Hopkins (2007) points out, the US experienced increasing stress between the discourse of nationalist conservatism and assertive corporate globalism, with an economy that has expanded globally and a politics that remains decidedly local. The “fear of foreign invaders, stirred up in the aftermath of 9/11, called for the rebuilding of fortress America” (Hopkins 2007, 109). This is the conflict within the Trump strategy: at one end an economic need of global integration and, at another, the local fear of losing a moral and cultural identity.

Despite their initial influence in shaping renegotiation objectives, the access afforded to members of the advisory councils was eventually eliminated. The decision to disband the councils was precipitated by a majority of the councils’ members deciding to step down after inflammatory remarks were made by the President about the Charlottesville ‘Unite the Right’ protest, in which Trump “appeared to confer legitimacy on white supremacists” (Olorunnipa, McCormick,

and Niquette 2017).³ As the NAFTA negotiations began just days after these events, an increasing shift was apparent within the Administration, and it began to talk about ending the agreement between the US, Canada and Mexico.⁴ Lighthizer’s opening remarks at the first round of negotiations in Washington indicated that the more moderate tone in strategic objectives had been abandoned: “[w]e believe that Nafta [*sic*] has fundamentally failed many Americans and needs major improvements” (quoted in Mauldin and Vieira 2017). The increase in protectionist nationalism within the White House created a chaotic point of uncertainty. Trump repeatedly threatened to initiate the NAFTA withdrawal mechanism through an executive order. The Trump Administration moved farther from the goal of modernizing the agreement, favored by the business interests of the advisory councils, toward populist propositions that were clearly unacceptable to others at the negotiating table (Swanson 2017a). This was especially evident in the novel suggestion by Lighthizer that the renewed agreement should include a US-specific content provision for manufactured goods

³ It is unclear whether opposition to the President’s remarks about the Charlottesville protests, and the resignations that followed, represent a moral issue or merely a cost-benefit analysis among businesses anxious to distance themselves from the White House.

⁴ Whether the disbandment of the advisory councils was by order from the President or by way of a consensus within the council is an issue unrelated to the one discussed here; the distinction between the two possibilities does not address the rationale behind the action (Tracer, Williams, and Son 2017). To contend that Trump had orchestrated the councils’ dissolution would be to confirm a continuation of his populist rhetoric, while alleging that the councils disbanded on their own accord would imply that the extent of the damage caused by the President’s previous populist rhetoric was enough to dissuade collaboration with more moderate business interests.

rather than the current one that applied to regional content in general (Donnan, Nicolaou, and Webber 2017). Not only was this new negotiating position a misrepresentation of the stated goals within the *Summary of Objectives for the NAFTA Renegotiation* (USTR 2017), it rejected the once-influential advisory councils' view that such a qualification "would greatly complicate the ability of companies, particularly small- and medium-size enterprises, to take advantage of the benefits of Nafta [*sic*]" (Matt Blunt quoted in *Wall Street Journal* 2017). Now following nationalist objectives, the President increased threats to withdraw if demands were not agreed to by Canadian and Mexican counterparts (Swanson 2017b).

In the face of an increasingly nationalistic policy standpoint, the moderating influence of the advisory councils was eliminated and the White House returned to the principles on which Trump began his electoral campaign. For him, trade was decidedly a zero-sum game and disagreement among partners was cause enough for an abandonment of alliances.⁵ This shift away from the influence of business interests resonated in other spheres. For example, Trump arrested plans to establish economic councils on infrastructure (Beech and Burns 2017). The new protectionist approach focused only on US production and reflected the limited effects of business influence after the disbanding of the councils. This seems to support a theory of opportunity in policy-

making and influence: corporate influences could have an impact on American foreign policy only insofar as they have immediate access to the White House. Business influence can be more strongly expressed when institutions exist to support its advisory capacity. This fits within Dahl's (1998) plurality framework, which sees these interests as part of a plurality that influences policy through government access structures. When these avenues of access break down, pluralism also dwindles. While historically influential on government policy, business interests have recently become limited in their access to the Executive after the disbanding of the advisory councils and thus have suffered diminishing input in foreign economic policy (Pastor 1980, 45). This diminished capacity to influence on the part of corporate interest groups has resulted in a more radical nationalist position taken by the Trump Administration toward the renegotiation of the trade agreement.

This shift constitutes an exceptional circumstance in American politics and the President's populist foundation for these actions is clear. The creation of the Strategic and Policy Forum and the Manufacturing Jobs Initiative was an ideological expression of free-market liberalism, one generally embraced by the Republican Party. But their destruction was the product of radical populist nationalism. The electoral campaign and subsequent presidency of Donald Trump took its direction from a tradition of "Americans who have a natural tendency... to take up positions of fear, hostility, militancy, intransigence, and self-righteousness: in other words nationalist positions" (Lieven 2012, 83). The removal of business influence after Trump's apparent sympathizing with white supremacists exacerbated the populist rhetoric of the White House, which now has few moderating influences on its policy development. The belligerent isolationism taken up by the

⁵ The implications of a NAFTA abandonment have been the subject of increasing study and have been an area of analysis by various firms and scholars. Influential reports include Cheney et al. (2017), Gertz (2017), Globerman and Sands (2017), Johnson (2017), Mosquet, Handschuh, and Wilson (2017), Murphy (2017), Parilla and Muro (2017), and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (2017).

Administration's NAFTA negotiating team, which has employed a strategy of repeatedly threatening to end the Agreement, is the expression of a nationalist populism free from the influence of economic elites.⁶ The formal power structures within the Executive once contained a regulated *agonism* between populist nationalism and the interests of corporate elites; what Mouffe (2000) would call the democratic paradox. But Trump's demonization of Washington elites has nullified that possibility. Trump's rise to power deployed the distinction between an 'us' and 'them' struggling for hegemonic control; in this case, a 'people's' antagonism fighting for control against a liberal globalist conspiracy. The nature of his rise to power, therefore, made the continued existence of an institutional agonism impossible (Žižek 2009, 277-81). The rhetoric the President employed, the disbanding of the advisory councils, and the resulting shift in renegotiation strategy have each been in line with the populist hegemonic struggle for which Trump was elected. A white, middle-class, nativist fear of cultural loss, dispossession, or alien occupation has led to the conspiratorial idea of a liberal dictatorship and a hatred for its embodiment in economic elites as well as ethnic and religious minorities (Lieven 2012, 85). While the abandonment of the advisory councils may have been a sign of return to original principles for some of Trump's radical nationalist supporters, it has severely damaged the capacity of the NAFTA renegotiations to obtain originally stated objectives, or real economic

advancement in the United States.

Abandoning NAFTA would be incredibly damaging to the US economy, though analysts differ as to the immediacy of the impact and the degree to which corporations in various sectors would be affected by this scenario. It is clear, however, that the foreign policy strategy of the Trump Administration, left unmoderated by critical influences, is harmful for American national interests internationally. The official policy of the Administration is demonstrably lacking in substance on key international issues, with no mention of alliances or global challenges save its aim to destroy "ISIS and other radical Islamic terror groups" (White House 2017a). Within the Trump policy frame, economic logic is abandoned for nationalist rhetoric. Although the withdrawal from NAFTA is explicitly offered as a solution within the *America First Foreign Policy* (White House 2017a), it is seen in the frame of benefitting manufacturers and American jobs which are predominantly the beneficiaries of NAFTA and would be likely much worse off within a nationalist economic policy (Irwin 2017). The *America First Foreign Policy* strategy in general, and the NAFTA renegotiations in particular, have been negligent on the realities of American interests and have simplified economic problems to the point of illogical conclusions. Rather than isolation from the international economy, job growth in the US depends on stimulated domestic demand and improving competitiveness in business. While redressing ongoing trade disputes should be a US foreign-policy objective, sacrificing international relations with key allies by using belligerent rhetoric and policy positions does nothing to improve economic conditions and instead exemplifies a contempt for

⁶ Mearsheirmer and Walt (2007) exemplify this inequality of influence in the case study *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Moreover, Lindblom (1977) demonstrates the effect of wealth on the degree of interest group influence on democratic government in politics and markets.

the American liberal-democratic principles that have historically increased economic prosperity (Leffler 2017).

US foreign policy has traditionally accepted a balanced approach to decision-making with an acknowledged role in it for economic interests. This has been undermined severely during the presidency of Donald Trump. While it is clear that corporate interests can exert significant influence on White House policy, pluralism within the Executive can exist only insofar as competing interests are given access to decision-makers. The logic of this influence rests in the benefits of democratic agonism within policymaking. Given the Trump Administration's goals of economic advancement, these corporate interests represented a source of business expertise, stakeholder consultation, and moderation within the White House policymaking mechanism. However, the populist antagonism displayed by President Trump has eliminated the possibility of moderation and endangered the renegotiation of the trade agreement. In the absence of corporate influence on the negotiations, a belligerent nationalist strategy has developed in the US Administration that has exacerbated the inherent difficulties of renegotiating NAFTA. The policy shift made by the Trump Administration is damaging not only to international relations but also to national economic growth. There appears to be a significant sacrifice of national interest for populist tenets and it remains to be seen what further repercussions this populist shift will have on both domestic and international policy formation.



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