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"Towards a 'Better' Blob? The US Foreign Policy Establishment in the Age of Donald Trump"

President Donald Trump's promises to "drain the swamp," deconstruct the "deep state," put America First, and end the "forever wars" is frequently seen as an attack on America's traditional foreign policy elite. Who makes up this elite—the institutions at the heart of American empire, the foreign policy establishment, the "blob"?¹ In his rhetoric, at least, This elite—whom former Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes infamously termed "the blob"—has long been understood as the unaccountable, interventionist force guiding American foreign policy.

In rhetoric, Trump appears to target s-the interests that have dominated the US foreign policy consensus since WWII, responsible for building and managing the postwar liberal international order.²

But how accurate is this characterization in practice? Trump's stance is often labeled isolationist and at odds with the principles of the liberal international order and long-established national interests. He has already made demands to convert Greenland, Canada, Panama, Mexico, Gaza, and effectively even Ukraine,³ into outright colonies or vassal states, through force if necessary. His rhetoric celebrates unadorned imperial power, without even a veneer of international law or democratic values.

Is Trump challenging the fundamental principles of the foreign policy establishment, or does he rather represent a shift in the nature of the "blob" for the new global order of the twenty-first century?

Several months into the administration, key elements of Trump's foreign policy agenda have become clear. First and foremost, it is apparent that Trump has not broken with American foreign policy's longstanding grand-strategic aim: is to maintain global primacy based on overwhelming military power. This objective is unlikely to radically change under the Trump administration.⁴ But changes of the second-order are highly likely, and these changes will transform the ways in which the US marshals global power and maintains primacy.

Although his inflammatory rhetoric has undoubtedly rattled allies and US national security elites, Trump is intensifying existing foreign policy trends that emerged after the end of the Cold War. Far from an isolationist platform, his 2017 Trump's National Security Strategy (2017) announced a new era of "geopolitical competition" especially but not exclusively against revisionist states.

¹ Emma Ashford, "Build a Better Blob: Foreign Policy is not a Binary Choice Between Trumpism and Discredited Elites," *Foreign Affairs*, May 29 2020; <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/build-better-blob>; also published by Cato Institute, May 29, 2020; <https://www.cato.org/commentary/build-better-blob#>. That Ashford's article was published by CFR and by Cato simultaneously indicates definite convergences between the traditional foreign policy establishment and what has conventionally been considered an outlier in foreign policy thinking.

² H. Brands, P. Feaver, and W. Inboden: "In defense of the blob: America's foreign policy establishment is the solution, not the problem," *Foreign Affairs.com*, 29 April 2020; <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/defense-blob>. The Trump administration's policy of slashing government agencies – such as USAID – is symptomatic of this approach to the 'deep state'.

³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-03-27/us-seeks-to-control-investment-in-ukraine-squeezing-out-europe>

⁴ Patrick Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Spring 2018), pp. 9–46. See also, Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, interview with Megyn Kelly, 30 January 2025: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-marco-rubio-with-megyn-kelly-of-the-megyn-kelly-show/>. In it, Rubio reaffirms that while certain policies will change under Trump, US global primacy remains central.

~~A more subtle change, however, may indeed be on the table. He is not an isolationist. H~~Though he and the corporate, political, and intellectual forces behind him remain wedded to US global power, ~~they seek to~~ wield ~~ited~~ in more unilateral, nationalist, and “realist” ways. To aggressively pursue US vital interests, they broadly reject liberals’ promotion of “democracy,” freedom, or a *liberal* international order. ~~A move away from “soft power” will likely bring the US into disrepute in the international arena and significantly heighten the risks of global conflict.~~

~~These principles have always been exercised pragmatically. PTrump advocates using foreign policy as a “blunt instrument.”⁵⁶ “Peace through strength” sums up Trumpism’s approach to power politics and echoes hawkish Reagan-era strategies.⁷ But even~~ Post-Cold War liberal internationalists—many of whom filled the ranks of the Clinton, Obama and Biden administrations—~~were only selectively~~ attached to multilateralism and international law. Military budgets continued to burgeon throughout the period since 1991,⁸ though multilateralism and diplomacy remained important alternatives.

Instructively, the traditional foreign policy establishment largely fell into line behind this turn to “the central role of power in world affairs” in a world of sovereign states.⁹ ~~This relationship runs two ways. Trump’s administrations have also incorporated some of the traditional foreign policy establishment’s practices and methods, including the development of new think tanks and institutions to support a vision of increased geopolitical conflict.~~ We may be witnessing the emergence of a foreign policy establishment with Trumpist characteristics, but not the end of the “blob.”¹⁰ Projecting an image of an America First anti-war candidate, Trump’s will be a consequential presidency, while America will remain an ordinary imperial superpower.¹¹

~~The US foreign policy establishment and postwar liberal order~~

Godfrey Hodgson defines the traditional establishment as “a history, a policy, an aspiration, an instinct, and a technique.” This *history* is forged by victory in war, especially WWII; a *policy* of opposing ‘isolationism’, communism, and supporting ‘internationalism’; an *aspiration* to moral and political leadership of the world, underpinned by an exceptionalist sense of national destiny, but combined with armed supremacy; an *instinct* for bipartisanship, a consensus around goals and means; and their *technique* was to build and work through the federal executive rather than electoral politics.¹² These are the men who built the “deep state.” The deep state consists of “the group of powerful men, who know each other...; who share assumptions so deep they do not need to be articulated; and who contrive to wield power outside the constitutional or political forms: the power to put a stop to things they disapprove of...; the power, in a word, to preserve the *status quo*.”¹³

Since the 1940s, the ~~US foreign policy establishment has circulated around one central institution: the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) has been at the center of the~~US foreign policy establishment. CFR’s -networks included international banks, US foundations, Wall Street law firms, Ivy League academics, allies among the State Department and White House, and the leadership groups of both main political parties. As a liberal internationalist think tank, the CFR -was central in formulating official state policies towards internationalism, marginalizing -opponents as backward and “isolationist,” mobilizing elite opinion, and engaging in informal diplomacy to promote Atlanticism and what became the Bretton Woods system.¹⁴ The CFR was by far the most dominant foreign policy body at the time. Between 1945-72, a survey of over 500 government officials from both parties found over 50 percent to be CFR members.¹⁵

After 1945, the US promised to spread freedom, nurture prosperity, and promote peace and security through the Bretton Woods system that comprised the liberal international order. Institutions like the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, as well as the lessons of the trials at Nuremberg and Tokyo, resulting in the 1949 Geneva conventions, enshrined principles of human rights, international law, and norms of equality among nations in a system of international security and order. This global system’s rules and laws would apply equally to the United States, the hegemonic power that led the order.

It was the beginning of the American century.¹⁶ The foreign policy establishment proclaimed that progressive-sounding cause, based on definite principles: .¹⁷

1. Constantly expanding and open markets, broad commitment to freer trade

2. Global economic expansionism under the umbrella of US-led liberal international order, underwritten by a US military guarantee
3. The dominant elite's ideology of American exceptionalism, a sense of historic mission of a chosen people to improve the world.¹⁸

But from its infancy, the liberal international order reflected the characteristics and interests of its leading powers, especially the United States. Consequently, the liberal order was class-based, elitist, and strongly imbued with racial and colonial assumptions.¹⁹ In an era of anti-colonial nationalism, the rise of an international Left, and class conflict in national and international politics, Western power was cemented and supplemented by regional security alliances outside the United Nations system. NATO, for example, violated the principle of international security by regionalizing and operating outside UN control.

⁵ https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/02/michael-anton-white-house-machiavelli?srstid=AfmBOorDpRK93OKIAV8zf2-hY9T-s-vYg_Ng5TX5P3jWn1JASeVJ2eDl; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-38996534>.

⁶ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/2024-republican-party-platform>; <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-is-trumps-re-election-likely-to-affect-us-foreign-policy/>.

⁷ Fred Fleitz, ed., *An America First Approach to U.S. National Security* (AFPI, 2024). See Niall Ferguson, "How to Win the New Cold War: To Compete With China, Trump Should Learn From Reagan," *Foreign Affairs* Jan/Feb 2025. Reagan architected a new cold war with the USSR, raising military spending by over 50%, stationing intermediate range nuclear missiles in Europe, among other actions.

⁸ https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/wpj/wpj_fall01.html; <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/usa-biden-administration-refusal-stop-weapons-israel-unconscionable>.

⁹ <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/articles/new-national-security-strategy-new-era/>.

¹⁰ Ashford; see also Emma Ashford, "When Donald Met Washington: The Genesis of 'Great-Power Competition'" in Robert Jervis et al, eds., *Chaos Reconsidered: The Liberal Order and the Future of International Politics* (Columbia UP, 2023).

¹¹ G. Grevi, "Trump's America: the ordinary superpower," European Policy Centre discussion paper, 13 June 2017; <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Trumps-America-the-ordinary-superpower~20ff44>.

¹² Hodgson, p.12.

¹³ Hodgson, pp.4-5.

¹⁴ Parmar, 2004; Shoup and Minter, 1977; Wertheim, 2020.

¹⁵ Shoup and Minter; Peter Grose: *Continuing the Inquiry: The CFR from 1921 to 1996* (CFR Press, 2006).

¹⁶ G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (Yale University Press, 2023).

¹⁷ Priscilla Roberts, " 'All the Right People': The Historiography of the American Foreign Policy Establishment," *Journal of American Studies* 26, 3 (1992), pp.409-434. For an excellent exemplar of the philosophy and practices of US foreign policy establishment in its formative years, there is no better place to begin than Godfrey Hodgson, *The Colonel: The Life and Wars of Henry Stimson, 1867-1950* (Northeastern University Press, 1992).

¹⁸ Bastiaan van Apeldoorn, Jasa Veselinovic, and Nana DeGraaff, *Trump and the Remaking of American Grand Strategy* (Palgrave 2023).

¹⁹ Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton University Press, 2009)

In the first “hot war” of the Cold War in Korea, the US and its Korean allies violated the UN’s own procedures, committed war crimes despite signing up to the Geneva conventions, and engaged in numerous massacres of unarmed civilians and political opponents.²⁰

The Era of Democracy Promotion

In successive periods of reconfiguration since the postwar period, the US foreign policy establishment has altered its method without altering its aims. In the aftermath of Vietnam, the end of the Cold War, and finally the 9/11 shock, ²¹ newer elite forces styled as “outsiders” and backed by wealthy corporations, individuals and foundations, challenged the policies of the foreign policy establishment.²² But these crises of uncertainty never came with a revision to American Grand Strategy.

The first came in the 1980s, when a new policy think tank would enter the scene. Founded in 1973, the Heritage Foundation played a crucial role in propelling Ronald Reagan ~~was propelled to office~~, by the rise of the New Right and the Heritage Foundation. He went on to inaugurating a new hawkish phase of the Cold War ~~against the Soviet Union~~, and renewing American elite self-confidence after the disasters of Vietnam. Heritage Foundation co-founder Ed Feulner, a self-styled outsider, ~~who~~ sought to build a new conservative establishment to rival the power of the liberal establishment. In the run up to the 1980 election, the Heritage Foundation armed Reagan with a *Mandate for Leadership* in the run up to the 1980 election, a report containing more than 2,000 policy recommendations oriented towards facilitating direct confrontation with the Soviet Union, laying the groundwork for Project 2025²³ and the prominence of right-wing institutions today.²⁴²⁵ “Peace Through Strength” prevailed partly due to a more than 50 percent increase in the military budget, costly military interventions, and heightened risks of nuclear warfare between the superpowers.

This strategy of active containment would momentarily become obsolete with the USSR’s collapse. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its eastern European allies rendered obsolete the governing conventional national security concept of containment. A number of options appeared on the new agenda. Among these was ~~the~~ including a “peace dividend,”—a new world order based on UN principles. Ultimately, the notion of —but “Democracy Promotion” ultimately prevailed. This idea emerged from “democratic peace theory,” till then an obscure academic theory that claimed that under certain conditions, democracies were less likely to fight wars against each other.²⁶

This new paradigm was rolled out under Clinton as “democratic enlargement” and “engagement”, to promote “market democracy” worldwide in an era of neoliberal globalization. ~~It~~ This brought together three key political tendencies in US party politics—liberal internationalism, neoconservatism and conservative nationalism—thus forming a new configuration within the US foreign policy establishment.²⁷ The establishment’s objectives appeared to be based on democratic ideals, but it divided the world along lines of “zones of peace” and “zones of turmoil,” compelling US-led

²⁰ Inderjeet Parmar, “Racial and imperial thinking in international theory and practice: Truman, Attlee, and the Korean War,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 18, 2 (2016); Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War* (Princeton University Press, 1981).

²¹ Inderjeet Parmar, “Foreign policy fusion: Liberal interventionists, conservative nationalists and neoconservatives – the new alliance dominating the US foreign policy establishment,” *International Politics* 46, 2/3 (2009), pp.177-209; see also, Priscilla Roberts, “‘All the Right People’: The Historiography of the American Foreign Policy Establishment,” *Journal of American Studies* 26, 3 (1992), pp.409-434.

²² Kirkpatrick Sale, *Power Shift: The rise of the Southern rim and its challenge to the Eastern establishment* (New York: Random House, 1975).

²⁶ Inderjeet Parmar, “The knowledge politics of democratic peace theory,” *International Politics* 50, 2; pp.231-156.

²⁷ Parmar, 2009.

interventionism. This new map resembled the Cold War divisions of the previous era. Zones of turmoil, often regions rich in oil and other mineral resources, necessitated intervention.

Under George W. Bush and the global war on terror, these three tendencies were more effectively unified. 9/11 renewed America's globalist mission, providing a plausible enemy against which US power could be ranged on a worldwide scale, including at home.²⁸ The strategy of the war on terror broke international law and -created "zones of exception" outside Geneva conventions. This dealt a body blow to liberal norms and laws, a lesson not wasted on the rest of the world, including Russia two decades later. The false pretext for the war on Iraq undermined domestic support for US hegemony in world affairs. Following the global financial crisis in 2008 and the emergence of new global competitors, the US establishment began to enter a new period of systemic crisis. Its basic principle of interventionism was increasingly discredited on the Left and the Right. Barack Obama's presidencies failed to deliver promised radical change and deepened the crises of credibility at home and internationally. The moment was ripe for a new period of reorientation.

It seems unlikely that any future Democratic administration would fully reverse course from the gains to US power achieved through Trump's use of blunt force. Past transformations in the methods of the blob occurred in the aftermath of Vietnam and the decline of the New Deal order, an era which saw the rise of neoliberalism, the end of the Cold War, and finally the 9/11 shock.²⁹ On each occasion of crisis and renewal, newer elite forces styled as "outsiders" — "sunbelt cowboys" vs "Yankees", for example — backed by wealthy corporations, individuals and foundations, challenged the policies of the foreign policy establishment.³⁰ The "crisis" of uncertainty that engulfed the foreign policy establishment at the end of the Cold War led to a shift in strategic methodology rather than in grand strategy. The choices made in that transitional moment ultimately laid the foundation for Trump's ascension to the White House.

Trump: Dragging the Establishment Towards America First Taking stock of the new Blob

Today, America's allies worry about what a second Trump administration might do to their core relationships in the G7, NATO, UN, or World Health Organization, among others. The broader shape and distribution of world power is also changing: there are now more, stronger, resentful elites, economies, and states demanding recognition, decrying their own "centuries of humiliation" at the hands of the colonial and neo-colonial West.³¹ Trump's erratic style and draconian trade policies will also likely lead to important geopolitical reconfigurations. In the face of historic US tariffs, Japan, Korea and China have opened discussions on better managing the economic effects of US hiked tariffs, and even the EU seems to be moving closer to China than the US would probably prefer.³²

²⁸ Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism* (Manchester University Press, 2005).

~~At home, the establishment is held responsible for the “forever wars.”³³~~ In the 2020 presidential elections, both Joseph Biden and Donald Trump ran on a platform of ending the “forever wars,” ~~signalling major shifts underway.~~ But the Biden administration’s untrammelled support for Ukraine and Israel, as well as an increased export of weapons to Taiwan ~~signalled~~ ~~marked~~ the continuation of militarism. Promising to take on the “national security industrial complex,”³⁴ Trump’s 2024 campaign challenged the core of the traditional bipartisan foreign policy establishment.

~~The declaration was backed by a seeming shift in~~ ~~This was reflected in a marked shift in Trump’s~~ appointments to top defense, security, and foreign policy positions ~~between his first and second administrations.~~ Trump’s high-level appointees in 2017 looked much like those in previous administrations, incorporating many members of the CFR and other elite policy planning groups and think tanks. ~~A small difference appeared with the priority given to real estate investors. Still, Trump’s appointees pointed towards real estate investors~~ who tend to be far less global in outlook than Wall Street banks and investment firms. Real estate investors constituted ~~20 percent and~~ 25 percent of Trump financial sector appointees in ~~2017 and 2019, respectively.~~ ~~In addition, family-owned private businesses reinforced this~~ ~~nationalist~~ ~~unusual~~ tendency. Only ~~17 percent (2017) and~~ 20 percent ~~(2019)~~ of Trump appointees in the national security spheres were linked with Fortune 500 firms ~~in 2019,~~ compared to around 40 percent during the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations.³⁵ ~~By 2019, after much turnover, many appointees were MAGA/America First loyalists.~~³⁶

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By 2024, nominees and appointees ~~appear to be chosen on the basis of their~~ ~~appear based on the~~ “Führer” principle: loyalty to Trump and ~~support for~~ ~~fully saturated in~~ MAGA principles:³⁷ anti-immigration, rejection of globalization, rejection of free trade, denial of climate change, and questioning the need for military interventionism while supporting greater military spending.³⁸ ~~Rather than a radical break with the establishment, however, this agenda broadly aligns with~~ ~~However, a large part of that agenda aligns with~~ the mainstream GOP.

Senator Mitch McConnell, the former Senate leader, backs Trump’s hard power approach.³⁹

~~Such change within continuity is further demonstrated by~~ Trump’s secretary of state, Marco Rubio, and (former) national security adviser, Mike Waltz, ~~who~~ ~~are closer~~ to the traditional foreign policy establishment. Rubio has links to the Heritage Foundation, American Compass, and Project 2025, indicating recent movement towards Trumpism while remaining ~~ske~~ptical on trade matters.⁴⁰ Mike Waltz, a former US special forces member who served in Afghanistan, previously called for a century-long occupation. His book, *Warrior Diplomat*⁴¹ argues that the US was fighting a battle for Afghan “hearts and minds”, a process of “cultural conversion.”⁴² Waltz maintains direct business interests in Afghanistan through a company he co-founded, Metis Solutions, a consulting and police/military training firm, which was sold for \$92 million in 2020.⁴³ Waltz previously opposed US withdrawal from Afghanistan, disputing Trump’s position at the time, and his attitude towards Ukraine now embraces a negotiated end to the war.⁴⁴

Trump’s picks for special envoy to Ukraine and Russia (General Keith Kellogg), ambassador to China (David Perdue), secretary of defense (Pete Hegseth), Treasury secretary (Scott Bessent), and deputy National Security Adviser (Alex Wong), represent previously more “moderate” Republicans only recently drawn into Trumpist circles. Figures with CFR membership in the first administration include Scott Bessent, Elaine Chao (transportation secretary, 2017–21), Jamie Dimon (Trump’s business advisory council, 2017–18), Zalmay Khalilzad (Trump’s Afghanistan reconciliation envoy, 2018–21, staying on under Biden), and Christopher Miller (acting defense secretary, 2020–21), among others.⁴⁵

The Trump administrations have therefore been at least partly populated by previously more traditional foreign policy Republicans, as well as those with membership of the “liberal” CFR.

The second Trump administration has greater think tank and policy networks than the first, and some of these links are “centrist” in character. On the second order question of methods, what we’ve seen is a closing gap between Trumpism and the traditional establishment. This includes strong ties to the relatively traditional yet Trumpist Heritage Foundation, which has embraced a large part of the Trump agenda without supporting policies hindering free trade. For example, Russell Vought (Office of Budget and Management), John Ratcliffe (CIA), Tom Homan (Border Tsar) all have links to the Heritage Foundation. Vought and Homan co-authored Heritage’s Project2025, while Brendan Carr (FCC), Stephen Miller (Policy Chief of Staff and Homeland Security adviser), and Pete Hoekstra (Ambassador to Canada), were all closely involved in the plan’s development.⁴⁶

The Trump phenomenon has also birthed its own think tank—the America First Policy Institute (AFPI), in 2021. The AFPI now boasts 172 employees, an office in Ft Worth, Texas, revenues of \$27 million and expenditures of \$22 million in 2023. AFPI prepared the ground for Trump 2.0⁴⁷ John Ratcliffe and Keith Kellogg are leading figures in AFPI, as are Linda McMahon (secretary of education), Brooke Rollins (secretary of agriculture), Scott Turner (HUD), and Pam Bondi (US attorney general).

Brooke Rollins, AFPI’s President and CEO, attributed the organization’s founding to the belief that Trump’s movement had become “a permanent feature of American life...” Convinced that Trump’s return to the White House was inevitable, the AFPI sought to shape “a new era of thought in American national security.” They blame the traditional foreign policy establishment for “progressive experimentation” which outsourced the national economy and found more in common with other international elites than American citizens.

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³³ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Penguin, 1992)

³⁴ <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/agenda47>

³⁵ Apeldoorn et al, p.78.

³⁶ ~~Apeldoorn et al:~~

³⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/13/trump-america-first-foreign-policy>. This was starkly demonstrated during the controversy surrounding the leak to a journalist of confidential war plans ahead of US military attacks on Yemen in March 2025; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/27/full-transcript-of-trump-teams-yemen-attack-plan-that-was-shared-on-signal>.

³⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/us/politics/trump-administration-cabinet-appointees.html>.

³⁹ Mitch McConnell, “The Price of American Retreat,” *Foreign Affairs* Jan/Feb 2023; pp.127-139.

⁴⁰ <https://americancompass.org/marco-rubio-gets-it-our-economic-addiction-to-china-is-a-national-security-threat/>.

⁴¹ *Warrior Diplomat: A Green Beret’s Battles from Washington to Afghanistan* (Potomac Books, 2015).

⁴² <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/green-beret-us-fighting-100-year-war-19029/>.

⁴³ <https://theintercept.com/2021/08/20/mike-waltz-afghanistan/>. Waltz had served in the George W. Bush administration as VP Dick Cheney’s aide.

⁴⁴ <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2024/11/13/mike-waltz-wants-america-to-focus-on-the-threat-from-china>.

⁴⁵ L. Shoup, *Wall Street’s Think Tank* (Monthly Review Press, 2018), shows strong direct and indirect links between the CFR and Trump’s 2017 appointees; pp.315-330.

⁴⁶ This process of Heritage’s embrace of Trumpism is part of a plan to institutionalise Trumpism: “Inside the Heritage Foundation’s Plan to ‘Institutionalize Trumpism’,” *New York Times Magazine*, 13 February 2024; <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/21/magazine/heritage-foundation-kevin-roberts.html>. Back in 2015-16, Heritage leaders had dismissed Trump as a “clown”.

⁴⁷ <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2023/07/13/the-meticulous-ruthless-preparations-for-a-second-trump-term>. AFPI financial information is at <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/854202763>.

Yet, even in its rejection of the traditional foreign policy approach to the post-Cold War era, AFPI lauds the establishment's Cold War achievements, in which US military dominance was underscored by strong alliances and a prosperous economy. The AFPI asserts that better leadership could have averted the failures of the post-Cold War era.⁴⁸ The organization seeks a return to the heyday of American supremacy, forged by the very establishment that Trumpism seeks to radically reshape.

"The only true existential danger to America is American leadership unworthy of the Americans," which can and must be changed in order to "chart a path back to greatness that is our right",⁴⁹ (Italics mine) states the AFPI's call for a renewed more aggressively weaponised offensive in world affairs. The message to traditionalists is to get on board or get out of the way. ~~Trump, with the active support of Elon Musk, appears to be going even further than President Truman's secretary of state, Dean Acheson, who wanted in the Cold War with the Soviet Union to "bludgeon the mass mind of 'top~~

⁴⁸ Fred Fleitz, Ed., *An America First Approach to U.S. National Security* (America First Policy Institute, 2024). A more sophisticated version of this is found in Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018).

⁴⁹ Fleitz, pp.1-3.

government” into accepting the conclusions of NSC 68.⁵⁰ Trump is actively trying to decapitate, deconstruct and re-orient the federal government.⁵¹

AFPI’s book length statement on national security features chapters written by figures who served in Trump’s first term as well as those appointed and/or nominated to serve in the second administration. Figures associated with the book have links with the Heritage Foundation, Global Taiwan Institute, Center for Security Policy, Richard Nixon Foundation, Gingrich Foundation, Claremont Institute; agencies including the CIA, DIA, NSA, and USTR; and links with military contractors and consultancy firms.^{52 53} ~~While Trump’s appointees in 2019 were relatively isolated from the think tank world, the second administration has undergone a dramatic change. In 2025, there is a far more integrated cohort of national security policymakers rooted in traditional and older organisations.~~

Many new Trump appointees are also connected with Wall Street law firms and hedge funds. This includes, for example, Bessent (partner Soros Fund Management; Key Square Group; Brown Brothers Harriman); Pete Hegseth (Bear Stearns); Michael Anton (Citigroup, BlackRock). Anton is Trump’s intellectual and now director of the state department’s policy planning staff, its internal think tank. Other appointees like Waltz, Stephen Feinberg, and Keith Kellogg are directly linked with the “military-industrial complex,” which Trump vowed in Agenda47 to bring down as part of the corrupt warmaking establishment.

~~Despite a minor, but important, deviation in appointments in 2019, Trump’s nominees and appointees today, as well as the composition of his wider think tank eco-system, resemble key features of the traditional foreign policy establishment than his appointees in 2019. Harking back to the conservative tradition of the 1980s, his policy reorientation represents a shift in tools rather than a strategic break with the CFR’s postwar liberal internationalism. Nevertheless, centrist establishment bodies like the CFR wield significantly less power than in the postwar era.~~

Ferment in US foreign policy cross the political spectrum

~~Under Trump, the Republican party has split into three camps. First are the “primacists,” believers in US global hegemony with support of NATO, Ukraine, and engagement, and whose ranks include Rubio and Waltz. Second are the “prioritizers,” Trump loyalists that prioritize US attention on one region over another, such as the Indo Pacific over Europe/Ukraine/Russia. Finally, there are the “restrainers,” who are focused on domestic policy, argue for military restraint, and consider a China a greater threat than Russia. All these camps contain Trump loyalists and exhibit greater ambiguity around intervention. They are all, of course, pro-Israel.~~

~~On the Democratic side, there is a progressive grand strategy, which trends against the imperial tendencies of the Democratic establishment. The past several years have also seen the rise of a “centrist” bipartisan force, such as the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, which has been backed both the Koch Foundation and Soros philanthropies, restrainers from the extreme right and critics of liberal imperial hubris from within the liberal camp.⁵⁴~~

~~In the meantime, the traditional liberal establishment has shifted in Trump’s direction. Within the heart of the liberal establishment, there are other stirrings of change.~~ In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, the CFR’s former president Richard Haass argues for a negotiated settlement of the Russia-Ukraine war, agreeing that territorial concessions to Russia would be inevitable.⁵⁵ A January 2025 CFR report, from its Center for Preventive Action, considered various approaches to Ukrainian security after a ceasefire or peace agreement that would work without NATO membership or guarantees. This represents a new pragmatism at CFR in light of Trump’s election victory, which overlaps with the views of Trump’s special envoy to Russia and Ukraine, the AFPI’s Keith Kellogg. Kellogg is anti-Russia and expresses strong support for Ukraine. In the past, he criticized President Biden along Trumpian lines—for not more heavily arming Ukraine to ward off Russia’s invasion

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threat and then failing adequately to help Ukraine to repel Russian forces after the invasion. His critiques resemble those of CFR.⁵⁶

Finally, important changes have occurred at the oldest US elite foreign affairs think tank. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) has developed an “American Statecraft” program headed by one of the co-founders of the Quincy Institute, Stephen Wertheim. This has led to a pronounced “restraint” tendency at CEIP, exemplified by a recent report calling for US grand strategy to be more restrained, selective, and strategic given the end of US hyper-power and the increasing danger of great power warfare.⁵⁷ This stance similarly overlaps with the Trumpist approach.

Trump II is now far more embedded in an extensive eco-system of think tanks and Wall Street firms and has already institutionalised “geopolitical competition” and punitive trade tariffs, as the new normal. ~~Wall Street Republicans fear Democrats’ “threat to capitalism” more than Trump’s “threat to democracy.”⁵⁸ The traditional foreign policy establishment has been rocked by Trumpism, and dragged into its slipstream, as has the mainstream GOP. Nevertheless, the traditional foreign policy establishment remains a major force. But~~ Trumpism has shown staying power, has broadened its elite support base, and is likely to remain an enduring feature of domestic and foreign policy politics. ~~The traditional blob is no longer calling all the shots.~~

~~The second Trump administration will continue to play a major role in world affairs, like every post-1945 US commander in chief. His ascendance comes at a time when both parties have embraced industrial policy and protectionism as means to strengthen the US economy for intensified geoeconomic and geopolitical competition, mainly with China, but also with other emerging states and the European Union.~~

⁵⁰ <https://www.cfr.org/blog/twe-remembers-nsc-68>. National Security Council paper 68 (NSC-68) was the blueprint for militarised containment of the Soviet Union entailing worldwide and domestic military and political warfare. Elon Musk heads the Department of Government Efficiency, although there is much ambiguity about his actual role.

⁵¹ <https://snyder.substack.com/p/decapitation-strike>.

⁵² Fleitz, pp.223-226. Further think tank or funder linkages to Trump’s appointees include Manhattan Institute, Koch industries, Business Council, Hudson Institute, Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, Foreign Policy Initiative, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

⁵³ Fleitz, p.11.

⁵⁴ Inderjeet Parmar, “Washington’s newest think tank is fomenting a revolution in US foreign affairs – and a retreat from interventionism,” *The Conversation*, 28 February 2020; <https://theconversation.com/washingtons-newest-think-tank-is-fomenting-a-revolution-in-us-foreign-affairs-and-a-retreat-from-interventionism-132214>.

⁵⁵ Richard Haass, “The perfect has become the enemy of the good in Ukraine: Why Washington Must Redefine its Objectives,” *Foreign Affairs.com* 4 November, 2024; <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/perfect-has-become-enemy-good-ukraine-haass>.

⁵⁶ <https://www.voanews.com/a/former-trump-nsc-official-explains-his-vision-for-ending-war-in-ukraine-/7712184.html>.

⁵⁷ <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/strategic-change-us-foreign-policy?lang=en>.

Now, as always, the US has no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, only permanent interests.⁵⁹ The US today is more flexible in how it plans to maintain global primacy. Trump II represents a more focused phase of a “blunt instrument” approach. It is to that end that Trump, and Trumpist forces, are trying to reshape the “blob” towards a more aggressive global primacy, one that dispenses with significant but always negotiable norms, rules and laws of the liberal international order but preserves its underlying, imperial, power dynamics.

⁵⁹ <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00008130>.