

# Barbarians Inside the Gate: Has Donald Trump Launched a Hostile Takeover of the Republican Party?

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I'm here to talk about how Donald Trump launched a hostile takeover of the Republican Party, so of course today is the day he decides to fire his secretary of state, Rex Tillerson.

This is relevant to the larger subject because Rex Tillerson, despite his lack of foreign policy experience, came from the bosom of the establishment. He was a long-time, Bush-supporting Republican from Houston. Trump knew him as the chair of Exxon Mobil, but Tillerson was recommended for the job by Dick Cheney, the former secretary of defense and the former vice president of the United States, and Condoleezza Rice, the former national security advisor. If you go down the list of people who recommended him, you will find that it's the Who's Who of the Republican foreign policy establishment.

Donald Trump, who ran against the Bushes, who insulted the Bushes, picked the Bushes' choice for secretary of state. Now that person is out. This is an indication of the ongoing civil war within the Republican Party that was launched by Donald Trump when he first declared his candidacy for office a little under three years ago. At first, no one took him seriously—because who would take Donald Trump seriously as president of the United States? No one took him seriously because politicians have seen candidates like him before: the kind of person who gets in without political experience, thinks it's going to be easier than it is, and blows up. People took him even less seriously as he proceeded to set forth his platform.

That's because he talked about priorities that had not been accepted as central Republican values in decades, if they had ever been. The Republican Party has not been in favor of tariffs since the Great Depression. Yet Donald Trump campaigned in favor of tariffs. On immigration, the Republican Party had been split roughly fifty-fifty between its restrictionist wing and its accommodationist wing. Donald Trump didn't shade the difference. He put himself squarely on the restrictionist side of that dispute and, in fact, went two steps further than anyone on the restrictionist side had ever gone before.

He refused to say that cutting the budget was an important priority. Small government and restraining government spending had been Republican goals going back decades. Even moderate

Republicans like Dwight D. Eisenhower used to talk about controlling government spending and controlling government power. If there is one thing that the Donald Trump presidency is not about, it's controlling government power.

Looking at other things that Republican candidates have often been in support of, we see that social conservative causes were a priority for many candidates during the primary campaigns. Sometimes it seemed that some candidates were running more for preacher than for president. Donald Trump, however, said little about that. In fact, he was favored by religious conservatives during the primary.

When it came to foreign policy, Trump questioned military alliances that were painstakingly supported and built by Republican presidents going all the way back to Dwight D. Eisenhower. He questioned the American role in the world, suggesting that he might want to pull out of Afghanistan, suggesting that NATO had seen better days, and suggesting that perhaps America would be retreating from its role in the world.

These views had not been a Republican priority since before the Great Depression, since the days of Calvin Coolidge and the Kellogg-Briand Pact. And yet Donald Trump took on all of these verities, all of these Republican truths, and it was as if the party didn't care; it was as if all of the things Republicans had thought were true about their voter base were no longer true.

So, has Donald Trump won? Has he, through his victory in the primary process and in the general election, completely changed the Republican Party so that up is down, black is white, and the GOP no longer looks like what it used to look like?

The answer is "no." On a host of things there is an ongoing battle for the party's soul. I will address three main topics. First, what the Trump challenge actually is, as opposed to what he suggested it might have been when he was running in the primary. Second, to the degree that the battle lines are drawn, what are Republicans who are not Trump loyalists angry about and for what are they willing to fight? Three, what's going to likely happen over the next year or two as we continue to see fighting on those lines.

The first year of the Trump presidency made many people wonder, where did he go? He campaigned as a populist, he campaigned against Republican priorities, but once in government, he seemed to be in line with the Republican elite. You take a look at his initial cabinet appointments, and with the exception of National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, who was very quickly shown the door after it was demonstrated that he had lied in his background checks about contracts with Russia and about contracts he had with lobbyists in the Turkish government, virtually everybody else came from some wing of the Republican establishment.

The education secretary, Betsy DeVos, might be a new name to most, but to people in the Republican world she was a well-known, well-connected, former Michigan Republican Party chair who

cared a lot about educational choice. Secretary of Defense James Mattis was somebody who was favored by all wings of the Republican Party and was strongly within the Republican consensus. The successor to Michael Flynn, General H. R. McMaster, is another one of those military people who straddled the divides within the Republican Party, but represented its consensus views. Finally, we have the chief of staff, General John Kelly, who originally was the Department of Homeland Security advisor. When the original partnership of Reince Priebus and Steve Bannon proved to be unworkable, he was brought in to create order in the White House and, again, is somebody who was understood to be directly within the mainstream of the Republican Party. He was also somebody who quickly showed many of the more populist advisors out the door, such as Sebastian Gorka and, eventually, Steve Bannon himself.

Go through to the end of the year and what had Donald Trump done? Deregulation and tax cuts. He has increased military spending and signed a religious liberty executive order. He also appointed a justice to the Supreme Court, Neil Gorsuch, who is loved by the Republican lawyers of the Federalist Society.

Donald Trump put no significant political capital into the things that he made his signature issues. He seemed not be moving on immigration or trade. As of January 1, 2018, it looked like the Donald Trump who is president was not the Donald Trump who had campaigned for the job. In other words, the challenge he posed to mainstream Republican thought had been a false one. As of the start of the year, you could have concluded that he had basically pulled the wool over his voters' eyes, said that he was not, in fact, a new Republican but an old Republican with a very new set of clothes.

Now for the last two months, we have seen exactly the opposite. That Trump has been pushing immigration to a degree that makes anybody who is an accommodationist queasy. The reason we did not get an immigration deal at the end of February, despite the president putting a lot of pressure on the Republican Party, is that about a third of the Republican Party officials refused to go along with the hard-line, restrictionist proposal that he had put before the Senate as his own with the support of the majority of the Republican caucus.

We have been hearing a lot in the last couple of weeks about trade. The unilateral declaration of tariffs actually started a couple months ago. You heard it reported as solar panels, but in fact, the more damaging thing was washers and dryers, and now we have tariffs on steel and aluminum. This is a direct assault on the Republican, conservative, and business core belief in free trade. Now we have the firing of Rex Tillerson at exactly the time when negotiations (or hostilities—we are not sure yet which they are going to be) with North Korea are directly on the table. Rather than have somebody who is supportive of and is some ways answerable to the Republican Party establishment, he picked Mike Pompeo, somebody with very few ties to the establishment. Most people in Washington think tanks believe General McMaster will soon be replaced by somebody who is quite hawkish, perhaps even former UN

ambassador John Bolton. On these things, he has directly pushed the Republican consensus in a way that resurrects Republican concerns about Donald Trump. We have seen this across the board. The Republican establishments, both conservative and business, have been in open revolt about tariffs since the president announced them two weeks ago. You cannot pick up the *Wall Street Journal* without reading an editorial combating the president on tariffs; the business community is upset. Recently, 107 House Republicans signed a letter asking Trump to rescind the tariffs. The House speaker is clearly upset. It is as if Trump had questioned the divinity of Jesus, because that is how closely the Republican Party has embraced the idea that tariffs are bad. There is a lot of concern about that because the last time the Republican Party embraced protectionist tariffs was in 1930 with Smoot-Hawley, and that helped deepen the depression into the Great Depression and ended Republican Party dominance in Washington for decades.

Is trade a case of the president against the party? Or, if you look closely, is the president more in touch with a large number of Republicans than any of the faction leaders of the Republican Party had ever thought?

First, let us take a look at trade. The 2016 exit poll asked a question, does international trade cost jobs, gain jobs, or have no effect on jobs in the United States? Only 39% of Americans who voted thought that international trade adds to American jobs.<sup>1</sup> That 39% overwhelmingly backed Hillary Clinton. Only 18% thought that trade did not have much effect on jobs one way or another; they also overwhelmingly backed Clinton. The 42% who thought that trade costs jobs backed Trump two to one. If you do the math, over 60% of Trump's voters believed that international trade costs U.S. jobs, so the leadership of the Republican Party was out of step with the Republican voters. If anything, it's gotten even more dramatic this year. In 2017, a number of polls asked about trade and now up to two-thirds of Republicans believe that international trade is more of a problem for America than it is a benefit.

Overnight, the congressional Democrats (who had traditionally been skeptical of free trade at the urging of their unions) are now overwhelmingly more for free trade than are the Republicans, with the unions being a rump within the Democratic Party. The Republican Party has to adapt to the change that Donald Trump recognized in his voters.

Now, let us take on immigration. If you hear Republican leaders talk, maybe you would say the Republican leaders have always been pro-immigration. Fact is, back in the days when they were pro-tariff, they were also anti-immigration. That was something that Republicans were proud of. When Herbert Hoover ran for reelection in 1932, he talked about his pride in the midst of the Great Depression of making sure that immigration was not going to be re-opened.

But by the time of Ronald Reagan, Republicans were much more open to immigration. Reagan signed a great compromise in 1986 that legalized the status of about three million illegal aliens (which detractors called "amnesty") in exchange for employer sanctions. Thirty years later, we are debating the

same issue. The employer sanctions didn't keep the demand for illegal labor down and people have continued to come; so we have almost twelve million people who are estimated to be living here illegally.

In 2012, before Donald Trump was even a serious candidate, the Republican Party was divided on the question of immigration. An exit poll in 2012 asked what I considered to be a very hard sentiment: should people who are living in the United States illegally be given a path to citizenship or permanent residence? Alternately, should they be deported? There can be a lot of people who don't like illegal immigration but don't think they should be deported. But not hardcore Republicans, as half of Mitt Romney's voters in 2012 chose the deportation option. The country was split three to one in favor of legal status and the Republican Party was split fifty-fifty on the question.<sup>2</sup>

Donald Trump ran an entire campaign based on restricting immigration and he didn't move the needle much at all. Only 43% of Romney's voters were for the deportation option in 2010, and only 47% of Trump's voters were for the deportation option in 2016. The Republican Party voter base has been much more alive with a Trump-like sentiment than its leaders' sentiment on this key issue for quite some time. The orthodoxies that the leaders held was not the orthodoxy that the parishioners wanted to agree to.

Then take a look at foreign policy. The fact remains that we had very little accurate polling on it. Such questions are rarely asked, and when they are it is usually in direct response to an international crisis when we know that people tend to support their presidents. Any question that was asked with respect to foreign policy issues during the Obama administration would be something like: Do you support Barack Obama's policy as well? Of course we know how that's going to be answered. The same thing is true now. If you ask, "Do you support Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from NATO?" you would have exactly the same pattern of response. We see this on North Korea; had Obama said, "I'm going to meet with the North Korean president without any preconditions," you can rest assured that the Republican Party overwhelmingly would have called it naïve, foolish, and dangerous. How do we know that? Because they said so when Obama announced that he would meet with Kim. Democrats were casting it as statesman-like. What do you think people are saying now? It has almost exactly been reversed.

To get public opinion about foreign policy, we have to step back a little bit. But one thing that I remember seeing from a poll a couple of years ago was a question that asked about whether or not the U.S. military should go and risk American lives to defend certain countries within NATO such as Estonia. We have a treaty commitment to support the Estonians if the Russians invade, but only half of Americans supported that. The closer you get to a direct American ally, the likelier America is wanting to go to defend them. But the fact is that we have defense treaties with countries that most people are not even aware of and may not necessarily support. Would Americans, for example, honor the defense agreement with the Republic of China (aka Taiwan) in case the People's Republic of China (aka mainland China) decides to reassert by force its claim that Taiwan is part of China? Would Americans want to send the

Seventh Fleet and risk confrontation with China to keep the independence of Taiwan? My guess is that it's a lot closer margin than the Republican foreign policy establishment wants it to be.

We have that question implicated right now in North Korea. What would happen if the North Koreans were to threaten South Korea? Would Americans want to risk nuclear conflict with North Korea in order to prevent North Korea from destroying and conquering South Korea? This is, of course, why we have American troops in South Korea. My guess is that Americans want a position of security within the world but do not want to be the world's police, and that Americans are tired of being in a state of constant military conflict (particularly after the Bush-initiated military engagement when they don't see American interests at stake). This is the sentiment Donald Trump channeled.

That's not to say that Trump is right on these issues. I happen to be in favor of free trade. I happen to be less restrictionist on immigration than Donald Trump, and I happen to be in favor of a very strong American global engagement. Rather, it is to say that people who have led the Republican Party for the last twenty years have not persuaded the rank-and-file members of their party.

By not persuading their party or adapting their viewpoints to reflect where the voters are, the Republican Party leadership opened the door for a violent possible takeover, and that's what Donald Trump did and is continuing to do. He has said that he has spent the last year learning the ropes, but now he's feeling more comfortable with his instincts. Well, we know what his instincts are. His instincts across the board—with the exception of a few things like taxes and deregulation—are out of line of Republican orthodoxy.

He told us that in the campaign. He told us that two decades ago when he flirted with a campaign for president. A party leader whose fellow elected representatives do not want to follow him, and a party itself that has split its ideas between the leader and the members of Congress—this cannot end well unless both sides choose to reach a negotiated compromise. Which is to say that if we are going to have a new Republican Party, it has to be a Republican Party that accommodates the opinions of all types of Republican voters.

I often speak with pro-Trump people who hate the establishment, and they just cannot wait to see the Republican leaders thrown out. I ask them how they think they can win without some of these votes. How do you think you could win without the people who have declared themselves Republicans for decades? How can you win without those who have said that they support Ronald Reagan's ideas of free trade? How do you win unless you accommodate the old-guard Republicans? They never have an answer to that.

Similarly, if you ask the old-guard Republicans who are angry about Trump supporters and who want to overthrow the Trump wing of the party, they want to go back to pre-Trump orthodoxy and say that those who want to unseat Trump are not for immigration restriction. We don't want to change any

policies that reflect the effect that Chinese trade competition has had on the American manufacturing labor market. We want the military establishment to keep going exactly as it was before 9/11. If anything, we want it to be more aggressive. That is a very strongly held opinion and typical Republican foreign policy. You go to Republicans who want to unseat Trump and say, “Guess what, you put all those pre-Trump ideas on trade, immigration, and foreign policy on the table in 2016, and you got your hat handed to you. Smiley Jeb Bush didn’t make it out of South Carolina. Marco Rubio didn’t make it much past Super Tuesday and Ted Cruz couldn’t win in the tenth-most evangelical state in the country. You can’t beat this guy. You had your day and now you are a minority.” Both sides need each other.

In other words, both sides need to redefine the Republican Party so that it becomes something new, but neither side seems to understand that right now. Trump seems to think that he alone has the answers, that he alone was elected. He seems to increasingly trust his instincts, which means that he’ll be hiring more staff who reflect those instincts across the board. Republicans opposed to Trump seem unwilling to recognize that they are a minority. They seem willing to fight more than to talk or negotiate, more willing to fight directly rather than to adapt.

We saw this in the most recent Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) that took place in February 2018. This traditionally has been a place where the most-conservative Republicans gather together and celebrate all aspects of the conservative movement. This has been a haven for people who support the Second Amendment, social conservatives, free marketeers, and defense hawks. But over the last couple of years, the balance of power has shifted so that fewer of those people are on the agenda and more people who are espousing a very strongly Trump view of the world are part of the agenda.

This came to a head through a couple of invitations to this year’s CPAC. One invitation went to a European nationalist who was a member of a party that has a not-so-tenuous connection to the neo-fascist past. Republicans who are traditional movement conservatives were outraged and they protested—some in writing, but one colleague of mine protested in speech while she was there. The fact remains, there is not a majority of people behind that position within the Republican Party. Trump people can’t win without Trump critics. Trump critics can’t win without Trump people. The Republican Party that is divided against itself will surely fall. A party that will surely fall in the face of the united Democratic Party that used to dislike the traditional Republican Party, but absolutely loathes the Trump party.

We’re going to see all of this play out in the special election that is taking place on the other side of the state, between Republican Rick Saccone and Democrat Connor Lamb. The Eighteenth District that is in play tonight takes in much of southern, suburban Pittsburgh. It went for Mitt Romney by 15% to 20%. This includes some old, declining steel towns that I used to go in the 1990s. These were places where the county courthouses were grand and there were no open shops on the street. Despite this, Connor Lamb has been in the lead in three of the last four polls and, even if he were to lose, would outrun Hillary

Clinton by at least ten to fifteen percentage points. Two things are at play. First, the division of the Republican Party in suburban areas between traditional Republicans and moderate Republicans who no longer feel at home in the Republican Party is expressing itself by the moderates either voting for a Democrat for Congress or staying home. Second, the Democratic Party is so mobilized to defeat Donald Trump that the people who normally would not vote in a special election may well turn out and deal a blow to Trump. They wanted to punch the bully in the nose, and since they can't punch the bully in the nose by going to the White House, they're going to do it by punching his proxy candidate in the nose when they go to the polls.

These things are not going to go away unless the Republican Party understands what is going on. They cannot win this battle by doing what many in Washington think, by going back to the old way. It is under-reported that in Pennsylvania's Eighteenth District, Rick Saccone has been a very poor fundraiser; most of the television ads were paid for by the national Republican leaders who, therefore, determined the content. So of course, Washington Republicans under Leader Paul Ryan got in and immediately said, "We're going to talk about our tax cuts. Everyone likes tax cuts. That will turn it around." They spent millions of dollars. It didn't move the needle. Suburban Republicans who used to like the Republican Party do not care about tax cuts. That is something that should wake up every traditional Republican to the fact that things are different. We can't mobilize the center. We can't mobilize our old voters on the basis of perhaps the single thing that all factions of the Republican Party pre-Trump could agree on.

They are now talking about immigration. Did Republicans run on immigration nationally before Donald Trump? They did not. That is a sign of how the party has changed. The Democratic hostility is not going to go away either, as long as they don't have a big victory. Sometimes a great win can slake one's desire such that if they were to have an overwhelming victory in this year's midterm elections or a few very strong victories, it might wake up Republicans for 2020 and slightly diminish Democratic enthusiasm. For right now, however, that is not going to happen. The Democratic Party is united against all wings of the Republican Party. The establishment Republicans who think this will go away if Trump stops tweeting are wrong. They imagine they could just mobilize using traditional Republican issues, but that ignores reality. The Trump supporters who think these party problems evaporate if we can just focus on our issues more are wrong because that energizes Democrats and alienates some of the Republicans that they need.

Donald Trump's hostile takeover of the Republican Party can be successful if enough Republicans leave the Republican Party. He can take over the Republican Party if the disappointed movement conservatives and the disappointed moderates stopped voting Republican. Those two alienated groups could either vote for, say, a libertarian challenger like Jeff Flake or support an independent challenge by somebody like a John Kasich, perhaps on a ticket with John Hickenlooper of Colorado. The



consequences could be significant as it doesn't take very much change in voting behavior for Donald Trump's very narrow Electoral College majority to go away, nor would it take very much for the very narrow Senate majority to go away, nor the Republicans very narrow House majority.

The conclusion I want to leave you with, though, is that what is important and what is going on is not simply internal Republican Party issues. What is going on in this country is the same question that's going on everywhere else in the world. We had an election in Italy ten days ago where the parties that have dominated Italian politics since World War II were decimated. The center-left and the center-right had dominated Italian politics since 1946, yet received less than 40% of the vote ten days ago. Ten years ago, they got over 80%. What's changing these elections? The people who think the system doesn't serve them are changing how they vote: people who think that immigration should be restricted in some way, people who think that the economy is growing too slowly, people who think that the swamp needs to be drained because politicians serve themselves and the special interests. Sound familiar?

This is going on in other countries as well. The Brexit result in 2016 revealed that you had people who were upset at the way the political classes were not serving the British citizens' needs. They were people who were upset that their economic needs were not being met, people who believed that their communities were not being served by economic growth in London, and people who believed that immigration was driving their wage down and taking away their jobs. They coalesced over the idea to leave the European Union, and this group stood against the bipartisan elites of both major parties—if you count the Liberal Democrats as a major party, then two-and-a-half major parties—and they won. Across the world, you are seeing these changes happen because there are very real changes in political economy that are happening that the old Republican orthodoxy and the old Democratic orthodoxy in the United States are not answering. They do not answer the current vital questions. They do not address what to do when globalization hurts people who already make little income. They do not address how a new, more-modern and less-traditional society accommodates not just the new people coming in, whether they be immigrants or people who are largely secular younger generation, but the old citizens as well.

To illustrate the point, I was in Australia two years ago and went into the Australian Broadcasting Company. While going up the elevator, I saw a poster of a Muslim woman that said, "The face of the new Australia." I did my interview and came down in a different elevator. There was another picture, another person with a Muslim name. I thought if the new Australia has no representatives of the old Australia, this country is in trouble. But that is what is happening all around the world. We need to accommodate the new, but we also need to make a place for old. Political elites across the globe don't understand that challenge. They don't want to face the challenge. Therefore, people like Donald Trump can take advantage of this to launch new hostile takeovers of existing parties, as Donald Trump did here, or to upend the entire political system as the populist parties have done in some European nations recently.

The question I ask each of you to consider is how to solve that problem. If you are on one side or the other, you absolutely know that everyone who has colluded with the old system needs to go. They are the past, and we are the future. But the same is true on the other side. If your answer is that we need to bring back manufacturing, we need to bring back coal, and nothing is wrong in this country that moving back to 1955 wouldn't solve, then you also create political instability. We are in a civilizational crisis where we need to accommodate new ideas and new people and new formulations, and if we do not do so successfully, then you're going to have at best political instability or at worst a movement away from democracy as people begin to see the system does not work for them. So how do you want to solve this problem?

Should we be in favor of trade regardless of the effect on other Americans? If not, what should we do? Are you in favor of embracing new ways of thinking and new ways of cultural enrichment? If so, how do you make a place for those who it displaces or upsets? Statesmen do this. They look at competing demands and seek a synthesis where other people find only division. Donald Trump is not a statesman, but somewhere in this country we need to have one. Both on the Democratic side, but particularly on the trans-partisan side, otherwise what's going on in the Republican Party is going to go on within the Democratic Party and increasingly throughout our body politic until our democracy is in shambles.

Lastly, the only way the barbarians get in the gates is if we let the barbarians in. If there is a barbarian at the gate, it's because we, the gatekeepers, didn't know how to defend the city. That is our task. It is to redefine and defend our city so that we are not consumed with internal fighting. We must progress and face the twenty-first century in a confident, inclusive, and growing way so that we're not a country that's fighting ourselves. Because if we fight ourselves, both our nation and its ideals will soon perish.

## NOTES

1. "Exit Polls," CNN, November 23, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls>.
2. These percentages are interpolations of data from the 2012 and 2016 exit polls conducted by CNN. The original data for 2012 are available at "Exit Polls," CNN, December 10, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/election/2012/results/race/president/>.