

The political lexicon of a billionaire populist



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From the start of his presidential campaign, Donald Trump pledged “total change,” delivering his promises with a scorched-earth political vocabulary — “Lyn’ Ted,” “Crooked Hillary,” “drain the swamp,” “lock her up.” Some found his language appalling, but others found it refreshing enough to make him president.

Now, in the Oval Office, Trump and his chief strategist, Stephen K. Bannon, have moved beyond the campaign’s embrace of political incorrectness to shake official Washington with a new vocabulary that breaks from the usual liberal-conservative terms of debate.

Bannon rails against the “corporatist, globalist media.” Trump talks about “a global power structure.” Bannon promises the “deconstruction of the administrative state.” With evident relish, the president stands before Congress and enunciates every syllable of “radical Islamic terrorism,” even after his own national security adviser protests that the phrase is unhelpful.

“The populist rhetoric is so systemic, it’s hard to believe it’s not a deliberate effort to change the language of politics,” said Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.), who taught history at the University of Oklahoma before entering politics. “This is obviously very populist language — the idea that there’s finally somebody here to protect you from these international and corporate forces that are making you feel lost.”

The purpose of the new rhetoric is to break through the partisan paralysis of recent years, pull the country into an America-first nationalism and persuade Trump supporters that the new president meant it when he announced at his inauguration that “the hour of action” has commenced.

The language of the Trump administration rubs many politicians — Republicans and Democrats alike — the wrong way, just as it is intended to.

“I don’t like the name-calling,” former president George W. Bush said last month. “Nobody likes that.”

Nobody except those who consider Trump a much-needed provocateur who realizes that a linguistic poke in the face may be necessary to force the government to address the needs and pains of what the president calls “the forgotten men and women.”

“What you’re hearing is genuine change,” said former House speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), a Trump supporter and occasional adviser. “It’s an assertive language and a focus on America that cuts against the norm of what we’ve seen from our elites over the last 30 years.”

And that is exactly the point, said a senior administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because, he said, “the terminology of the movement is something for historians to look back on and analyze. It’s a little strange to talk about it in real time.”

The official said that the rhetoric of the Trump administration is designed “to be neither left nor right but a common-sense approach that shines light on a very out-of-touch small group of people in a few big cities who have been the big winners and who try to portray the mainstream of America as being abnormal.”

“A lot of the language you’re seeing is about one question: Are we reindustrializing America or deindustrializing America?” the official said. “Sometimes the language falls into a left bucket and sometimes a right bucket, but the consistent theme is that the proper role of the American nation-state is to create more prosperity for American citizens.”

During the campaign, Trump promised to rein in his rhetoric and become “more presidential than anybody, other than the great Abe Lincoln,” but he also said he would keep up the tough, street-level vernacular that thrilled crowds at his rallies.

As president, Trump has continued to make statements that are factually incorrect or are based on opinions he heard on TV. It is a pattern he followed throughout his business career. “I play to people’s fantasies,” he wrote in his first book, “The Art of the Deal.” “People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It’s an innocent form of exaggeration — and a very effective form of promotion.”

In addition to exaggeration, Trump has long used insults and dire descriptions to diminish rivals. With help from Bannon and senior adviser and speechwriter Stephen Miller, Trump has portrayed the country as a “mess,” beset with “the crime and the gangs and the drugs” that the president summed up in his inaugural address as “American carnage.” (The full sentence in which that phrase appeared — “This American carnage stops right here and stops right now” — is, according to the administration official, “a statement of hope, and if it took the word ‘carnage’ to get the community, and especially the media, to look at what’s really happening, then that’s what has to be done.”)

Trump and his strategists have turned their rhetorical guns on “coastal elites,” academics, journalists, financiers and Hollywood celebrities — a fairly traditional roster of targets for a populist.

The ideology that Bannon calls “economic nationalism” “is a very recognizable, quite common strategy that we’ve seen in Europe for many years,” said Bart Bonikowski, a sociologist at Harvard who studies the appeal of populism and nationalism. “They use language that vilifies elites, combined with glorification of the people and a pretty strong anti-intellectualism and skepticism about expertise. It’s a very powerful mix that taps anxieties and fears.”

The rhetoric Trump and Bannon use “is not conservative Republican language,” said Manfred Steger, a political scientist at the University of Hawaii who studies globalization. “It’s really the language of the left, the same rhetoric we heard in the late ’90s in the demonstrations against corporations that scour the planet for profits.”

By using rhetoric outside the usual right-left or Republican-Democratic debates, Trump and Bannon seek to establish the administration as the sole protector of the “forgotten men and women” against the elites, Steger said.

Cole said Trump is playing to resentments among “Americans who feel they’re not part of the cultural elite in New York. Nobody in Oklahoma had anything to do with the economy imploding. Those weren’t our banks.”

Trump has managed to blend left-wing populism, which tends to target Wall Street billionaires and corporate leaders as oppressors of the working class, with right-wing populism, which generally targets civil servants, intellectuals, the media, and racial minorities and immigrants.

To connect with certain elements of his base, Trump has revived terminology and phrases from previous Republican administrations, including some that critics have called veiled appeals to racism. And although Trump denied that his first immigration executive order was the “Muslim ban” he promised during the campaign, federal judges used his own descriptions of its intent to demonstrate discrimination.

By talking about globalism and corporatism, Cole said, Trump seeks not to unite the country but to solidify his support with “a very important target group — people who voted for Obama but were willing to try something different.”

Although Trump’s rhetoric is distant from the GOP mantras of lower taxes, smaller government and social conservatism, it is hard for Republicans in Congress to oppose a president who was elected under the GOP banner and who has a habit of tagging opponents as part of an enemy elite.

“Bannon and Trump’s message of economic nationalism is the opposite of

what Republicans have been preaching for 20 years,” said Patrick Buchanan, who ran for president twice in the 1990s as a populist Republican. “But what we saw in the speech to Congress was amazing: [House Speaker Paul D.] Ryan and those guys, standing and cheering for economic nationalism! Cheering for enormous public-works undertakings — the Republicans! It’s Trump’s party now.”

Cole said Trump’s foundation of support is strong enough to let him use divisive language — if he gets things done. “He has to show real progress on four things: border security, replace Obamacare, tax reform and rebuilding the military,” Cole said. “If we don’t get those four big things done, it’ll all collapse into finger-pointing and division.”

Administration officials agree that words go only so far; the president’s success will be measured, they said, by his ability to get big things done, with jobs and wages at the top of the list.

If many Americans consider Trump’s rhetoric an attack on intellectuals, academics, the media and science, they’re right, Gingrich said.

“I’m pretty happy being anti-intellectual,” he said. “We have a lot of academics and intellectuals in this country who are just wrong. If you’re the elites, you don’t care that globalism failed because you’re still making money. Look, I helped pass NAFTA, and I will tell you that the experience we’ve had has not been good. Bannon and I have a very similar critique of American elites. Trump is tapping into that with effective language.”

Asked whether the president shares or understands Bannon’s theories of nationalism, Gingrich said, “No, of course not. The president has a very broad sense of what he wants America to be. His philosophy is based on four basic principles: anti-left, anti-stupidity, anti-political correctness, pro-American. And that’s what you hear from him.”

Some of Trump’s comments about the forces he blames for the decline of the middle class strike some listeners as a resort to classic anti-Semitic tropes.

In one of Trump’s most powerful TV ads near the end of the campaign, he

spoke against “a global power structure that is responsible for the economic decisions that have robbed our working class [and] stripped our country of its wealth.” Those searing words were illustrated with images of billionaire hedge fund king George Soros, Federal Reserve Chair Janet L. Yellen and Goldman Sachs banker Lloyd Blankfein, all of whom are Jewish.

Steven Goldstein, director of the Anne Frank Center for Mutual Respect, a civil rights group based in New York, said the administration is using “the code words of anti-Semitism. . . . You’d have to be living in the Stone Age not to connect the dots.”

But the senior administration official called any suggestion of anti-Semitism “libelous and ludicrous,” and Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Jewish human rights group based in Los Angeles, said it is too early to conclude that such language is intended to condone anti-Semitism.

“When people on the far right say ‘global bankers,’ they mean Jews,” he said, “and these terms have a history to them and can serve as kindling. But I don’t jump to say ‘anti-Semitism’ because I don’t yet see an administration that has its structure and people in place. We have to be careful not to cry wolf.”

The rhetoric deployed by Trump and Bannon rejects the idea that open global markets and international institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the European Union will lift all boats.

But even as George H.W. Bush and the next three presidents, Republicans and Democrats alike, embraced globalism, it grew increasingly unpopular in some corners of the left and the right. The patriot and militia movements of the 1990s, the leftist and anarchist anti-globalization demonstrations in 1999, and the tea party and Occupy movements all blamed globalism for the decline of the middle class and the fraying of social bonds.

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To the evangelist Pat Robertson, globalization was part of a conspiracy by international elites to build “a new order for the human race under the domination of Lucifer and his followers.” CNN and Fox News anchor Lou Dobbs wrote bestsellers calling globalism a “war on the American dream.”

Now, Buchanan, who crafted many of President Richard M. Nixon’s speeches blasting the elites and the media, hears in Trump and Bannon’s language echoes of his own slogans.

“‘America First’ was my slogan in ’92,” he recalled. “I was at the Battle of Seattle in ’99 and so was Ralph Nader, just like Trump and Bernie Sanders were saying many of the same things.”

Buchanan says Trump’s opponents are correct to note the mismatch between his anti-globalist, anti-elite, anti-Wall Street rhetoric and the reality of a Cabinet filled with wealthy executives.

“I’ve never seen so many billionaires and bankers in there,” he said, “so it is an apparent contradiction. Trump is going to have to go beyond the rhetoric and deliver.”

Marc Fisher, a senior editor, writes about most anything. He’s been The Post’s enterprise editor, local columnist and Berlin bureau chief, and he’s covered politics, education, pop culture, and much else in three decades on the Metro, Style, National and Foreign desks.

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