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January 24th, 2025

## To the victor go the spoils: Analysing Trump-era foreign policy as an antebellum project

In the last several months, President Trump has sparked international attention and alarm with provocative threats to seize Greenland, Canada, and the Panama Canal for the United States. He has also **promised** to “wage war” on drug smugglers operating on the southern border, claiming that Mexico is “essentially run by the cartels.” In order to understand this outburst of assertive, expansionist rhetoric, we must look to the Reconstruction era of American history. The striking rhetorical parallels between these two periods suggest that the incoming administration, like those of the Reconstruction era, perceives it self as the victor of a dramatic internal struggle for the soul, survival, and future of the United States – and feels emboldened to act accordingly.

In 1867, two years after the Civil War, William Henry Seward orchestrated the purchase of Alaska from the Russian Empire. At the stroke of a pen, this ambitious U.S. Secretary of State increased the span of American territory by some 600,000 square miles. With rather less success, Seward also sought to lease the Bay of Samana from Santo Domingo; to purchase Greenland and the island of St. Thomas from Denmark; and to annex British Columbia. The succeeding administration of Ulysses S. Grant was no less covetous. Grant pushed hard for the annexation of Santo Domingo – the present-day Dominican Republic – on the **basis** that it would “redound greatly to the glory of the two countries interested, to civilisation, and to the extirpation of the institution of slavery.” He also stressed the strategic and economic necessity of securing American control over the Panamanian isthmus, **declaring** it crucial that the United States assert its “just claim to a controlling influence over the great commercial traffic soon to flow from west to east byway of the Isthmus of Darien.” Meanwhile, the Republican press regularly smouldered with feverish talk of raiding Mexico to secure the southern border. The annexation of Mexico, the *Herald* claimed, was an **opportunity** for “adding to the glory and the prosperity of the United States”, and a **way** to “round off the Republic.”

The Union's victory in the Civil War had emboldened Reconstruction-era Republicans to look upon the world with a newly discovered vigour and ambition. Many Americans emerged from the Civil War with a new sense of their nation's power and potential, some three million soldiers having been mobilised over the course of the conflict. Prior to the conflict, the United States army had consisted of just 30,000 men. Although the army was rapidly demobilised once the war finished, the genie was out of the bottle. As the New York *Herald* observed, the conflict had revealed to the American public that the United States was "the most powerful nation on the globe, which we were hardly conscious of [before the Civil War]." Just as importantly, these Americans felt that other countries and peoples had also become cognisant of this fact, the *Herald* observing that the Civil War had "startled the world with the power and resources of the Republic."

Many Republicans also felt that the United States, now relieved of the burden of slavery, had a responsibility to benevolently confer its institutions and values upon the wider world. Americans who had opposed all expansionist schemes during the antebellum period now felt that the United States could act as a 'civilising' force in the world, having overcome its original sin. As Frederick Douglass, one of the most celebrated pro-Republican orators and writers of his day, proclaimed, the United States could bring about the "beginning of the millennium which would see the end of slavery" by annexing Santo Domingo and replacing its 'savage' practices with American institutions. Accordingly, these Republicans believed that other peoples would welcome and embrace the extension of their nation's global influence. The New York *Times*, in February 1871, observed that the people of Santo Domingo were "almost unanimously in favour of annexation", while the New York *Herald* claimed that "intelligent Mexicans [were] beginning to ask 'When are the Yankees coming?'"

This assertive rhetoric has close parallels in the new administration. Just as the *Herald* called for an invasion of Mexico to eliminate the problem of "marauders and smugglers along the border", the Trump team has threatened to use military force to extend American power over its neighbours. Tom Homan, Trump's choice as "border tsar", has signalled that the new administration is considering the use of military force against Mexican drug cartels operating across the border, declaring that it "will use [the] full might of the United States special operations to take 'em out." Michael Waltz, the new National Security Advisor, likewise appears to perceive military force as a legitimate policy response to border insecurity, having helped to draft an Authorisation for the Use of Military Force to combat the cartels in 2023.

Officials in the incoming administration have also emulated their Reconstruction-era counterparts by framing these schemes as benevolent measures that would be welcomed by the populations in question. "To take this Mexico and raise it", the New York *Herald* declared in March 1872, "would be an honourable deed." It also predicted that Canada and the British West Indies would "fall like ripe pears into the lap of the United States." Trump, likewise, has framed his call for the acquisition of Greenland in altruistic terms. He has claimed that the people of Greenland would "benefit tremendously" from being brought under the American economic umbrella, while also insisting that

this territorial claim is motivated by “protecting the free world.” He has also suggested that the Canadian people would embrace annexation, claiming that “If Canada was to become our 51<sup>st</sup> state, their taxes would be cut by more than 60%, their businesses would immediately double in size, and they would be militarily protected like no other country anywhere in the world.” The Trump administration, like Reconstruction-era predecessors, feels that by winning a supposed struggle for the nation’s soul, it has also been conferred a responsibility to internationalise that victory.

The closeness of these rhetorical parallels suggest that the second Trump administration perceives itself, like those of the Reconstruction era, as the victor in an internal struggle for the country’s survival and future. This self-perception has emboldened the administration to look upon the wider world with a newfound assertiveness and sense of benevolence, each stemming from its belief that its victory genuinely ‘saved’ the nation. Trump made no secret of this belief, having **framed** the 2024 election as a final chance to “save America” and a struggle against an enemy “from within.” This perception appears to be shared among those he has picked for top administration posts. Defence Secretary designate Pete Hegseth, for example, **spoke** darkly in 2020 of the US armed forces being “forced to make a choice”, if Democrats won the election. And Elon Musk framed the 2024 election in similarly fatalistic terms, as a contest for “the destiny of civilization, of America, the western civilization.” This suggests that leading Trump backers have come to interpret their Democratic opponents as illegitimate threats to fundamental American values, rather than as worthy democratic rivals.

The new Trump team cannot, in short, be interpreted as an incoming administration like any other – nor even as a repetition of the first. It must instead be analysed as it perceives itself – as the victor in an internal struggle for the country’s survival and future. Emboldened by their sense of having saved the nation from an existential internal menace, Trump officials can be expected to push their foreign policy agenda with confidence and conviction. The world must brace itself accordingly.

### About the author



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February 25th, 2019



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