Trump doesn't really mean what he says. He's just trying to change the subject.

In the face of falling poll numbers, Donald Trump has argued that this year's election may be rigged, and also this week made a veiled threat towards Hillary Clinton by invoking the Second Amendment. But does Trump really mean everything he says? Probably not, writes Ben Margulies, *who argues that Trump is merely redeploying existing Republican rhetoric more sharply and to bigger audiences. He argues that Trump's comments are designed to further develop his populist rhetoric, and to take control of the media agenda, something he needs to do given his recent polling.*

If Donald Trump were an author (we know he's not, but bear with me), you could argue that he's been outlining the plot of a paperback thriller in full public view. As August began, Trump began charging that the 2016 general election would be rigged. With his villain in place, Trump then moved to the second act on August 9, when he made a comment at a North Carolina rally suggested that only "the Second Amendment people" could stop President Hillary Clinton nominating justices to the Supreme Court. Since the Second Amendment refers to the citizen's right to bear firearms, the implication was that it might be necessary and legitimate to resist Hillary Clinton's presidency by open rebellion.

By now, the world's political scientists, journalists, pundits and news consumers are so used to being aghast at Donald Trump that they might have cause to sue him for some form of repetitive stress injury. Such extreme rhetoric invites an obvious question: Does he mean it? Does he really think the election will be rigged? Does he really think people should take up arms against Hillary Clinton? Both historical and comparative analysis suggests that the answer – thankfully – is probably no.

Let us start with American history. The American national story starts with an armed rebellion against tyranny, creating a natural bias towards referencing armed rebellion and revolution. Thomas Jefferson actually felt occasional armed rebellion was a healthy sign that the citizenry would not accept oppression. Brett Lunceford cites the example of Davis Waite, a Populist Party governor of Colorado in the 1890s, said that "It is better, infinitely better that blood should flow to the horses' bridles rather than our national liberties should be destroyed." And of course, the sort of white nationalists that Trump appeals to have fond memories of the Southern camp in the US Civil War, which really was an armed insurrection against a perceived tyranny.

Nor is Trump the first contemporary Republican to deploy the Second Amendment in these terms. Sharron Angle, the party's nominee for the 2010 US Senate election in Nevada against incumbent Harry Reid talked of "Second Amendment remedies" should "this Congress keeps going the way it is," adding that "the first thing we need to do is take Harry Reid out."

And Republicans have alleged for some years that there is a significant risk of voter fraud at American elections. A number of Republican-controlled states, notably North Carolina and Texas, have passed laws tightening requirements that voters bring identification to the polls, which Democrats say is a bid to reduce turnout among lower-income and non-white voters. Corey Robin also notes that Trump is far from the first Republican to attack a Democratic veteran or Gold Star parent (the latter term referring to parents of a fallen soldier), as Trump attacked Ghazala and Khizr Khan.

So Trump is not innovating anything. He is merely taking existing Republican rhetoric and deploying it at sharper pitches, and before larger audiences. Does that mean that Trump actually believes that the polls will be rigged? Does that mean that Trump actually thinks of Hillary Clinton as a potential tyrant? Is he truly advocating violent insurrection in the even that she wins?

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>
> — Ben Margulies, University of Warwick
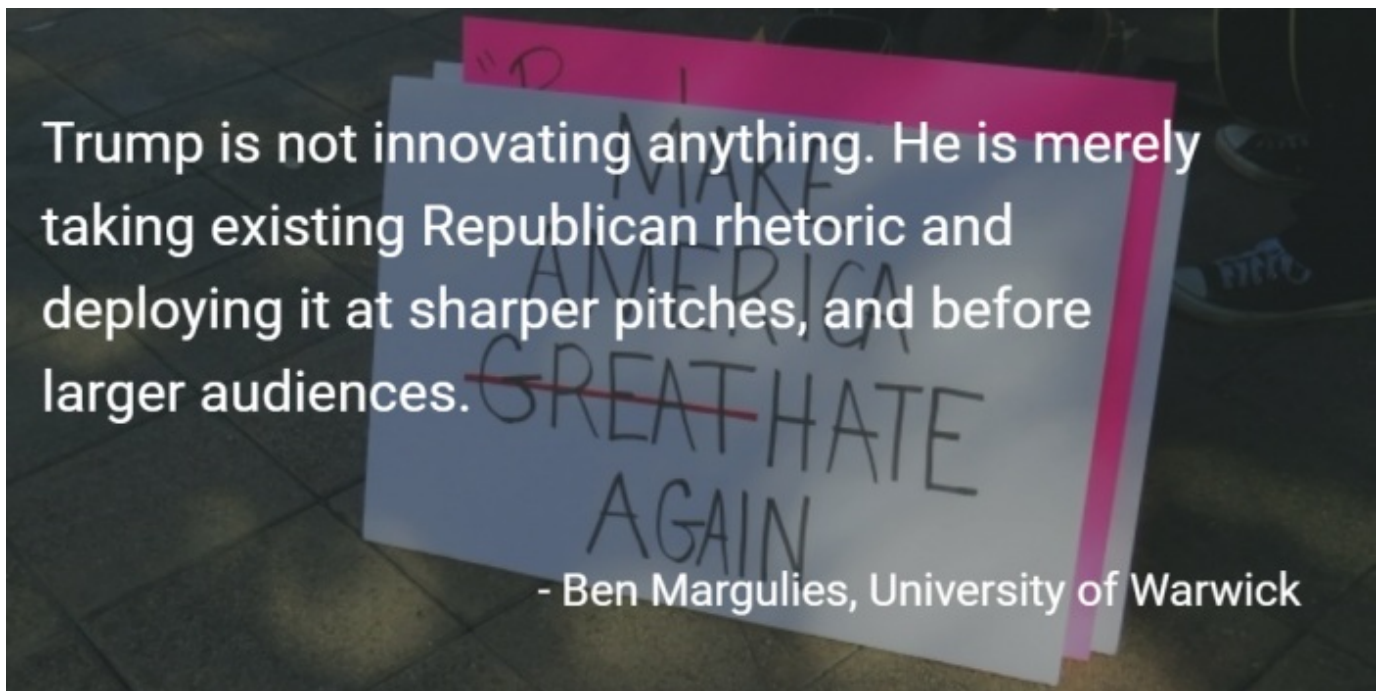
The answer is probably not. Trump's rhetoric more likely serves two other goals. The first is to further develop his populist rhetoric. As Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser define it, populism suggests that there is a "pure," unified people and a corrupt, and equally unified elite. (I have written about populism elsewhere if you are interested in more detail.) It is only natural to define that elite as thieves or tyrants. And in the sort of radical-right populism that Trump espouses, those elites have some sort of clients or followers who do their bidding and harm the interests of the pure people – like African-American voters that the Democrats "keep on the plantation" through the welfare state and use to manipulate elections.

The reference to gun ownership reflects several markers of identity for Trump's "pure people." For starters, it directly connects with the American founding narrative. Moreover, it reflects some of the cultural markers of white, non-elite culture. Gun ownership is associated with social conservatism and "red-state" values and cultural practices, especially with the lower-income white groups associated with the Trump campaign (the contemporary corps of gun-control opponents is mostly "white, rural, and politically conservative"). The Republicans' neoliberal populism, their lauding of "self-reliance" and opposition to welfare, is easily represented by the autonomous gun owner. And traditionally, at least in the US South, there was a strong racial element to gun ownership; some argue that the Second Amendment was enacted to protect Southern state slave patrols. Trump's strongly racialized campaign can draw on this association.

The other goal brings me back to that term in the previous paragraph – "radical-right populism." This is a term more often used in European politics, and I employ it deliberately. This is because Trump is not only comparable to other Republican public officials; in his statements and tactics, he resembles many contemporary European politicians. Recall that Trump tweeted a cartoon early in July that alleged that Clinton was corrupt, while including a prominent six-pointed star that clearly evoked the Star of David. A very similar controversy emerged in Austria four years ago, when Heinz-Christian Strache, leader of the radical-right Freedom Party, published a cartoon on Facebook that featured a banker with stereotypically Jewish features.

Ruth Wodak, author of *The Politics of Fear,* used the latter example to explain why and how politicians like Strache incited controversies by using potentially inflammatory or offensive language. Wodak outlined a phenomenon she called the "right-wing *perpetuum mobile*" [perpetual-motion machine]. She observed that right-wingers often provoke controversy intentionally, to take control of the media agenda and rally their supporters. The media thus fulfils some of the functions of a large network of party branches and militants, which populists often lack. (There was a great deal of press coverage in May and June about how skeletal Trump's campaign infrastructure was; however, his

fund-raising has belatedly [improved](.).)

Wodak also talks about how politicians like Strache and Trump deploy a strategy of "calculated ambiguity" (a theme she also addresses [here](.)). The idea is that the populist makes a statement which is both outrageous and somewhat unclear. In another Austrian example, Wodak notes that the Freedom Party makes a reference to "Viennese blood," implying to racists that the party has a racial or ethnic concept of who belongs in Austria, while allowing others to hear a reference to a specific 19th-century operetta, helpfully co-authored by a Jewish writer.

In the same way, Trump can make a reference to "Second Amendment people" having a solution and then he, or his representatives and allies, can deny that he is calling for Hillary Clinton's assassination. His spokesman [claims](.) that Trump merely referred to gun-owners as a powerful voting bloc; the Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, said Trump had made a ["joke gone bad."](.) Those voters who truly think that Hillary is a tyrant can imagine Trump endorsed the possibility of an appropriate solution; those who hope to preserve some sort of centre in American politics can imagine Trump was merely being facetious.

This leads into the last relevant part of Wodak's examination, "victim-perpetrator reversal." Here, the radical-right populist claims that, in fact, it is not Austrian Jews/immigrants/Muslims/Hillary who is the victim, but the outspoken politician, the target of a biased press and an elite "conspiracy." We already see this; Rudy Giuliani, former mayor of New York City, [condemned](.) a "corrupt media" for misrepresenting his party's nominee.

Why make wild threats now? As I said above, Trump's controversialist stylings are a way for him to compensate for his weak organisation; he needs the media to rally voters. He is [falling behind in polls](.), and is [facing a cascade of defections](.) from Republican elites and officeholders, which implies he'll lack their assistance and resources in the general election. So most likely Trump is trying to change the subject (as a commentator on Sky News suggested in an August 10 report) and reinforce his populist base. What he is not doing is actually proposing that someone shoot Hillary Clinton, though as Evan Osnos points out in *The New Yorker,* [others might take](.) Trump at his word. Some call this ["stochastic terrorism,"](.) implying that the candidate should reasonably know that he might incite someone to act violently, but that he cannot know precisely who or when.

Will this help him? Probably not much. More likely, he will simply encourage more defections among Republican elites, further undermining the institutional base he'd need to win. However adept Trump is at capturing and maintaining media attention, he still has to face the fact that if his angry white voters weren't at a serious demographic and economic advantage, they wouldn't be so angry. Their rage is partly an expression of their lack of electoral power. However fiery their anger, it may not be enough to rocket Donald Trump to the summits of power.

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