

The Trump administration is likely not made up of Holocaust deniers. But they do need the support of those who are.

blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/04/12/the-trump-administration-is-likely-not-made-up-of-holocaust-deniers-but-they-do-need-the-support-of-those-who-are/

2017-4-12

This week Donald Trump's press secretary, Sean Spicer caused controversy by suggesting that the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad was worse than Adolf Hitler in his use of chemical weapons, effectively ignoring the fact that the Nazi leader had used such weapons against German Jews during World War II. [Ben Margulies](#) writes that while it is possible Spicer simply made an uninformed gaffe, it may be part of a wider pattern of calculated ambivalence towards the anti-Semitism of the alt-right on the part of the Trump administration.



As the world deals with Syria's Bashar al-Assad, a murderous dictator who deploys [chemical weapons against civilians](#), it would be hard to avoid references to Adolf Hitler. No government in history deployed more chemical weapons against non-combatants than the Third Reich. Which, of course, was precisely the fact Sean Spicer, Trump's Press Secretary, [forgot](#) in his April 11 press conference, where he argued that not even Hitler had stooped to using chemical weapons.

The simplest explanation would be that Spicer is not especially competent, became flustered, and fell into a category error; thinking only of the "battlefield" use of chemical weapons, he made a statement that was technically true in a very narrow sense (Nazi Germany did not deploy chemical weapons in regular combat operations). Still, there remains something odd about this particular gaffe, because there remains something odd about making references to Hitler – especially in the context of the use of gas warfare – without having the Holocaust uppermost in one's mind. Timothy Snyder, a leading historian of 20th-century Europe and the Holocaust, calls this [a trivialization](#) that is along a spectrum with denial at its endpoint, one seemingly designed to obscure and minimise what Nazi Germany did, and did specifically to Jewish people.

Nor does Spicer's gaffe sit in squalid isolation. In its first days in office, the Trump White House infamously released a proclamation acknowledging Holocaust Memorial Day [which failed to mention](#) that the Holocaust's largest category of victims was European Jews. Deborah Lipstadt, one of the world's best-known authorities on Holocaust denialism, [called the administration's defence](#) of this decision – that it wanted to be "inclusive" of non-Jewish victims – a form of "softcore Holocaust denial." The Trump presidential campaign was accused of referencing anti-Semitic tropes on [multiple occasions](#).

For the sake of argument, let us assume that there is some wider pattern to this Trumpist tendency to indirectly allude to anti-Semitism. Let us suppose that the mentality of the Trump White House is such that it, in a sense, games Spicer towards patterns of thought that ignore the anti-Semitism that was so central to the Holocaust. The question is, why? What could Trump possibly gain from fomenting anti-Semitic sentiment in the United States? The US is hardly short of anti-Semitic sentiment, [nor devoid of anti-Semitic histories](#) (and this is [true of the American right as well](#)). But it would also be easy to overstate hostility towards Jewish Americans – a February 2017 poll found that, of all American religious groups, Americans felt "warmest" towards Jews. There are at least two possibilities that stem from the Trump's ethnonationalist, radical-right populist ideology. There is also a third which is actually separate from anti-Semitism, but speaks more to his populism.

Hypothesis One: The Trump Administration is using ambiguous signals to win support from specifically racist voters

It is no secret that Donald Trump has won vocal support from the "alt-right," a shorthand term for a strand of right-wing thought which is heavily white-nationalist or ethnonationalist, anti-elitist, anti-liberal and often misogynist,

alternative to either the neoliberal, small-government conservatism typified by Speaker of the House Paul Ryan or the religious/social conservatism associated with Vice President Mike Pence. This portion of the right often embraces anti-Semitism, even if the Republican Party as a whole is disinclined to.

In her excellent *The Politics of Fear*, Ruth Wodak [addressed](#) the communications strategies of radical-right populist parties. These are coalitions of neo-fascists and open racists on one hand, and a much wider constituency of populist voters who, though more likely to embrace authoritarianism and oppose immigration, nevertheless embrace certain minimal principles of liberal democracy. This latter constituency is not interested in reviving fascism, and has largely internalised post-World War II taboos against anti-Semitism and straightforward biological racism.

Wodak [shows how](#) radical-right populist leaders use “calculated ambivalence,” in the form of statements that signal sympathy to neo-fascist, racist or anti-Semitic components of their coalitions without doing so openly, so that the (relatively) more moderate majority of their electorate can pretend their leaders – and they themselves by extension – are not racist. Wodak [cites](#) the Austrian Freedom Party’s use of the slogan, “More Courage for Viennese Blood.” When confronted with accusations of racism, the party claimed it was just citing a 19th-century operetta (written by a Jewish composer, no less), so it couldn’t be racist. The moderates could believe the denial; the extremists could ignore it. Jennifer Saul makes a [similar observation about Trump](#), noting that he seeds his more openly racist statements with verbal exceptions, allowing his supporters a “fig leaf” that allows them to conceal and deny what is otherwise obvious racism.

In the Spicer case, the “calculated ambivalence” would work like this: the alt-right can pretend that the Trump administration has a more “nuanced” view of Hitler and his regime, and thus not too troubled by the Holocaust. Mainstream Republicans can dismiss Spicer’s gaffe as just that – an error. And, indeed, both interpretations may contain a grain of truth: Spicer misspoke, but perhaps because his employer is not too troubled by the Holocaust.

Showing a lack of concern about the Holocaust may also be a way of suggesting that the Trump White House will continue to enact anti-immigration policies. The Holocaust Remembrance Day proclamation was issued the same day as the first travel ban on seven Muslim-majority countries. Spicer’s gaffe came just before Attorney General Jeff Sessions [pledged](#) to redouble deportations and declaring that “It is here, on this sliver of land, where we first take our stand against this filth.”

Tellingly, Spicer’s misstatement came following [an eruption of alt-right anger](#) against the Trump administration, for intervening in Syria in the first place. The American alt-right tends to be isolationist and practice a rather defensive nationalism, much like its isolationist forebears at the eve of US entry into World War II.

Hypothesis Two: Trolling the media

In Wodak’s telling, “calculated ambivalence” has an added advantage. It creates an attention-grabbing “scandal,” complete with predictable media outrage. The radical-right populists in turn use this to condemn the elitist media and claim to be the victims of the whole piece. The sequence of scandal-outrage-victimization creates a “right-wing populist *perpetuum mobile*.”

If there is one constant that binds Trump, his thinking and his voters, it is populism, in Cas Mudde’s [sense](#) of a “a *thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’.*” The media is patently part of that elite, and it, as well as intellectuals and the “establishment” more widely, reject anti-Semitism and fascism. So minimising the Holocaust is a way to pick a fight with the elite which the whole radical-right populist coalition can take part in, whether they are mainstream Republican voters, working-class defectors from the Democrats or open racists. “Look, it’s the media again, falsely accusing Trump [and by extension, his voters] of racism.”

This sort of anti-elitism may be the most commonly held feature of radical-right populist politics internationally, above even xenophobia, nativism or any specific socioeconomic programme. Importantly, the alt-right shares this anti-

elitism. Even Milo Yiannopoulos, one of the alt-right's most visible public figures, [acknowledged this](#) in his guide to the alt-right, noting that one section of the movement ("The Meme Team") was primarily interesting in "a means to fluster their grandparents."

So, intentionally or not, Spicer may have integrated himself into a strategy of provoking perpetual tension with the media which in turn rallies supporters to a wider populist message.

Hypothesis Three: Trump is so hostile to government that he is deliberately promoting people who are bad at governing

This hypothesis, unlike the first two, accepts that Spicer simply erred. It is nevertheless rooted in the Trump administration's populism and anti-elitism. A number of Trump's appointments to high office have been controversial because critics saw them as lacking appropriate experience and/or expressing an ideological hostility to the functions of their new offices. Betsy DeVos, Trump's secretary of education, favours directing public funds to private schools and [showed considerable ignorance](#) of education policy during her confirmation hearings. His administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency [casts doubt](#) about the role of carbon dioxide in global warming. Trump's foreign-policy personnel [tend to lack](#) any diplomatic experience. As someone born in Texas, you'll forgive me if I don't spend too much time on [Energy Secretary Rick Perry](#).

If anti-elitism unites radical-right populist voters generally, then hostility to government in general unites radical-right populists and other factions of the Republican Party. For the populists, government is part of the elite; Steve Bannon, often associated with the alt-right, sees [the "administrative state"](#) as an ideological foe. For the mainstream Republican, government is an oppressive burden about the entrepreneur, the taxpayer, the free market and the godly. Hiring people who hate government is one way to tame the beast; hiring incompetents is another, as it proves government is always the problem.

This sort of counterintuitive staffing by Republicans long predates Trump. Reagan would appoint pro-business, anti-conservation figures to posts with environmental responsibilities, like [Interior Secretary James Watt](#) and EPA Administrator [Anne Gorsuch](#). Paul Krugman described this practice in a 2005 article on the Bush Administration, [detailing its cack-handed response](#) to Hurricane Katrina. Spicer may simply be incompetent, and even chosen on that basis. Given the populist contempt for the mainstream media, perhaps Trump's choice is itself a signal of disdain.

So, is Donald Trump a Holocaust denier? Probably not. He is, however, someone who needs the support of people who are, and of people who are happy to mimic them if it gets a rise out of the "libtards" and the "cosmopolitans." Like Vienna's late 19th-century mayor, [Karl Lueger](#), he's happy to both publicly condemn Jews and maintain intimate ties to Jewish people, like his close adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner. (Lueger once said "I determine who is a Jew"). Other right-populists relate to Jews and the Holocaust in a similarly [Janus-faced](#) way. He is also a person with a vested interest in sabotaging his own government. The true insult is not the denial of the Holocaust. It is the instrumentalisation of its victims as the Trump administration tries to manage its various coalitions and interests.

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