

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Dissecting the Trump Phenomenon

In early 2015, no one would have predicted that Donald Trump would be leading in most polls for the Republican presidential nomination and, to some extent, setting the agenda for the 2016 presidential campaign. The Trump phenomenon is energized and empowered by the arrogant, bombastic bravado of a man who is not only damaging the Republican Party; he is also damaging the American Republic. Since I am a Christian and write *Issues in Perspective* for Christians from a Christian worldview perspective, it is important to evaluate him and the phenomenon surrounding him from that perspective.

- First, let me try and put the Trump phenomenon into a political and cultural perspective. There is both a real and perceived estrangement and hostility between the elites and non-elites in American culture. Trump effectively knows how to play to that estrangement. Scott Miller of the Sawyer Miller political-consulting firm writes this: “Over 80% of the American people, across the board, believe an elite group of political incumbents, plus big business, big media, big banks, big unions and big special interests—the whole Washington political class—have rigged the system for the wealthy and connected.” He also concludes that this is “a remarkable moment” in our history, for many Americans truly believe that “something has changed, our democracy is not like it used to be, people feel they no longer have a voice.” The pretentious rhetoric of Trump plays to this perception: In effect, Trump is saying, “I am from that elite group. I know how they function and I can take care of them and get things done. I will solve the problems no one else has been able to solve.” Columnist Ross Douthat poignantly observes that Trump is a “rich, well-connected figure—a rich New Yorker, at that—who’s campaigning as a traitor to his class . . . So far he’s running against the Republican establishment in a more profound way than the Tea Party, challenging not just deviations from official conservative principle but the entire post-Reagan conservative matrix. He can wax right wing on immigration one moment and promise to tax hedge fund managers the next. He’ll attack political correctness and then pledge to protect entitlements. He can sound like Pat Buchanan on trade and Bernie Sanders on health care.”
- Second, let’s use the immigration issue as a test case to examine the heart of the Trump phenomenon. Immigration has been a thorny issue for several decades and when one gives focus to immigration one means Hispanic immigration, largely coming through the porous Mexican border with the United States. No one has had the political gumption to deal with this issue, so it has languished in the political morass of Washington. So, into this morass steps Donald Trump who forthrightly declares he will solve it: He will build a wall along the

border, force Mexico to pay for it, and then round up all 11 million illegal immigrants and send them back to Mexico. As his plan has unfolded, he has also declared that he will end birthright citizenship, which is deeply rooted in the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution.

- Permit me an analysis of this proposal:
 1. There are 11.3 million illegal immigrants (down from 12.2 million in 2007) within the United States. The columnist George Will helps us to understand that these immigrants have the following characteristics: 88% have been here for at least 5 years. Of the 62% who have been here at least ten years, about 45% own their own homes. About half have children who were born here and are hence citizens. Of the 4.5 million children who are citizens, they have at least one parent who is an illegal immigrant.
 2. Trump's plan would deport almost 10% of California's workers and 13% of that state's K-12 students.
 3. He proposes to deport intact families, including children who are citizens: "We have to keep families together, but they have to go." Thus he would indeed deport everyone, but then he adds, I have an "expedited way of getting them (the good ones, the terrific ones) back." George Will writes: "Big Brother government will identify the 'good' and 'terrific' from among the wretched refuse of other teeming shores."
 4. Trump proposes seizing money that illegal immigrants from Mexico are trying to send home. This would of course involve violating all the privacy laws of the United States Postal Service. It would also of course require a vast enlargement of the enforcement apparatus of the US government.
 5. He never discusses the cost of his elaborate plan. Columnist Charles Krauthammer cites the estimate from the conservative American Action Forum: His plan would take about 20 years to accomplish at a cost of \$500 billion for all the police, judges, lawyers and enforcement agents—and bus drivers—needed to expel 11.3 million people from the United States.

As a Christian, I cannot condone such a policy. It is inconceivable that the United States government would organize the deportation of 11.3 million people. For a moment, I invite every believer who is reading these words to envision this scene: US Marshals, US Army infantry and National Guard (i.e., the various militias of the states) and other law enforcement officers breaking down doors of millions of people living in America and forcing them to leave our nation. Is this what America stands for? Is this really the image we wish to convey about our nation, our values, our morals and our ethical standards?

Donald Trump, speaking as a Republican, formerly the party of Abraham Lincoln and the party that, at least since Ronald Reagan, has been the party of liberty and limited government, wants

his party and his nation to now stand for “mass roundup and deportation of millions of human beings.” To that end, he is also thereby advocating “a requisite expansion of government’s size and coercive powers.” This is not the principled conservatism of the Republican Party. This is, in the words of columnist Michael Gerson, a “European form of secular, nationalist, right-wing populism.” If Trump would somehow succeed in getting the Republican nomination, the GOP would be an anti-immigration party of the white working class. He has no connection to the religious conservatism of the Republican Party nor to the Tea Party constitutionalism of the last few years. Donald Trump is a demagogue who represents the worst side of the human condition—hate. He offers America pompous rhetoric filled with promises he cannot keep. My prayer is that evangelical Christians, who love the Lord and who seek God’s values, morals and ethical standards, will not be deceived by Donald Trump.

See Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (29-30 August 2015); Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* (30 August 2015); George Will in the *Washington Post* (21 and 27 August 2015); Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* (20 August 2015); and Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (24 August and 1 September 2015).