

Trump Campaign Dismisses America First Controversy



Trump at Center for National Interest, March 27, 2016

Source: AP

George Santayana's careworn expression may be invoked yet again over the meme adopted in Trump's first Foreign Policy speech delivered at the Center for National Interest (CNI) in Washington, DC on Wednesday April 27, 2016. America First. Santayana [said](#): "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Trump in his CNI [speech](#) issued his emphatic clarion call to the remaining primary voters across America:

It's time to shake the rust off America's foreign policy. It's time to invite new voices and new visions into the fold, something we have to do. The direction I will outline today will also return us to a timeless principle. My foreign policy will always put the interests of the American people and American security above all else. It has to be first. Has to be. That will be the foundation of every single decision that I will make. **America First** will be the major and overriding theme of my administration.

He did have this welcomed comment on Israel:

Israel, our great friend and the one true democracy in the Middle East has been snubbed and criticized by an administration that lacks moral clarity. Just a few days ago, Vice President Biden again criticized Israel, a force for justice and peace, for acting as an impatient peace area in the region.

That gave rise to criticism by the ADL's Greenblatt cited in a *Ha'aretz* [article](#):

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) urged Trump to reconsider the phrase Thursday citing its "anti-Semitic use in the months before Pearl Harbor by a group of prominent Americans seeking to keep the nation out of World War II."

According to a statement released by the Jewish watchdog, the most prominent leader of the "America First Committee" was Charles Lindbergh, who "sympathized with the Nazis and whose rhetoric was characterized by anti-Semitism and offensive stereotypes, including assertions that Jews posed a threat to the U.S. because of their influence in motion pictures, radio, the press, and the government."

Nonetheless, ADL chief Jonathan A. Greenblatt said "the undercurrents of anti-Semitism and bigotry that characterized the America First movement ... are fortunately not a major concern today."

"However, for many Americans, the term 'America First' will always be associated with and tainted by this history," he said, adding that "in a political season that already has prompted a national conversation about civility and tolerance, choosing a call to action historically associated with incivility and intolerance seems ill-advised."

For those of us old enough to have some knowledge of the isolationist anti-Semitic American First movement championed by Hitler admirer, Charles Lindbergh, who was given a personal award by Der Fuhrer for his aviation exploits, Trump's use of it was jarring.

When I read the transcript of his speech, I asked a source in the Trump campaign about Dr. Walid Phares, one of Trump's foreign policy advisers, who I knew personally from a decade of interaction including co-hosting radio shows on common

subjects dealing with the Middle East, Israel and Jihad. I asked whether he had written Trump's America First speech. The answer was, "no." instead I was directed to Phares' Fox News opinion [article](#) that purports to lay out Trump's foreign policy vision. There was no America First meme presented in his discussion. Lots of suggestions on changes in the traditional Americans alliances, prevention of Iran getting the nuclear weapon, that it may already possess, getting our allies in the NATO alliance to ante up the required annual defense budget allotments, dealing with ISIS and its global affiliates and the Muslim Brotherhood both here and abroad. Phares' ringing conclusion:

A new popular majority is sweeping the country during these primary elections and another greater national current will legitimize these new principles with the election of Donald Trump as president in November. These new foreign policy directions will have a deeply informed public backing them, so that President Trump can muster the energies of the American people to create a sustainable defense, encompassing clear objectives coupled with a strong international presence.

Now more than ever, confident American leadership is vital for a world in disarray.

The meme of new policy directions figured prominently in a *PBS News Hour* discussion on the merits of Trump's Foreign Policy speech with Phares and former State Department official, now Hoover Institute scholar, Nicholas Burns. Burns found what he deemed lots of contradictions in Trump's CNI speech. Phares demurred saying it was really about replacing old worn out failed policies with new ones. [Watch](#) the *PBS News Hour* interview with Phares and Burns.

Phares was interviewed by Steve Inskeep of *NPR's Morning Edition*. I have to issue a disclaimer on my part. I had found *NPR's* news biased against Israel back in 2003. I participated

in coordinating a national one day protest against *NPR* local affiliates in more than 40 locations, including the one I led in Connecticut. That led to a series of abrupt exchanges with the VP for News at the DC headquarters for several weeks following that protest. Notwithstanding, my attention was drawn to the transcript of *NPR* interview with Phares. Inskip of *NPR* pressed Phares on what Trump's speech was all about with alleged contradictions upending the old policies in favor of new directions. Phares pushed back on that until the inevitable occurred. Inskip asked him about the American First meme as it brought memories of the pre-WWII American First isolationists led by Lindbergh. Here is the transcript exchange:

INSKEEP: Dr. Phares, one other thing. And we've just got about 30 seconds here. He uses this phrase, America First. It's got a particular historical resonance. He's borrowing a phrase that was used by people who opposed U.S. Involvement against Germany in World War II – 1939, 1940, 1941. Very, very briefly, is there a message here?

PHARES: If you are criticizing Mr. Trump, you will find all the bad connections. He is very optimistic, and he is very positive none of these sentences that he pronounces go back to dark ages or go back to negative aspects at all.

I returned to the Campaign source and asked about that history. The response:

"America First" is a simple phrase that Mr. Trump uses to describe his approach to all aspects of American relations with the world, including trade, immigration and national defense. Under President Trump, the interests of the American people will be paramount. Putting it in the old category of the isolationists of the past who fought against American involvement in WWII is a mistake.