



Episode 1,705: Trump's Foreign Policy: Promises and Results

Guest: Zach Weissmueller

WOODS: Isn't it interesting about the way the standard view of things can leave out major, important parts? And it seems like that's a lesson that you could draw from many episodes in recent history. You just can't believe people aren't seeing X and Y and Z. So today, we're talking about a topic where there's been plenty of that, where, for example, in American foreign policy, you get *this is a bad guy*, and that's the entirety of the analysis. But I agree that this is a bad guy, but the thing is, I have to factor in 12 other considerations to this if I'm going to make a good decision as to what to do about that bad guy.

So we want to talk, in particular, expand on a video you made, and I'll link to that video at TomWoods.com/1705, in which you interviewed two people I'm quite fond of: one Thad Russell, who sometimes I find maddening, but maddening in ways that are really helpful for me, and Scott Horton, who's maddening only because I bet when you talked to him, you couldn't get him to stop talking. That is Scott Horton [laughing].

WEISSMUELLER: That was my experience. If I recall, that interview went on for about an hour, and I ended up only being able to use a few minutes of it.

WOODS: Right, right, right.

WEISSMUELLER: He's a fascinating font of knowledge.

WOODS: Oh, he's absolutely unbelievable. So I was so glad, in particular, because I know Thad has talked to Nick Gillespie before. I don't know how often Scott Horton has gotten exposure over on Reason TV, so to see him there was really nice to see. So we're talking about Trump and what people thought might happen with Trump in terms of foreign policy, and I include myself in this. I mean, I'm not infallible, and I didn't make any promises to anybody. I'd never do that. I did bear in mind — I don't know if Scott told you Horton's law, but Horton's law is that politicians always keep their bad promises and forget about the good ones. And so he was warning me of this with Trump. He'll do all the things he's threatening to do, but those things that make you a little bit hopeful, not so much. So let's try to refresh our memories about what were the kinds of things that Trump was saying in 2016 that made people who were concerned about war sort of stand up and take notice.

WEISSMUELLER: Yeah, he ran a campaign that appealed to many antiwar libertarians who said he's really bad on certain things, things like trade, but war is the most important issue, and on that, he's certainly much better than Hillary Clinton, and he actually represents a serious challenge to the foreign policy establishment that's been in control arguably since the

turn of the 20th century, but certainly since the turn of the 21st century. And this became in 2016 a very common reason that I heard a lot of libertarian-leaning people expressing support for Trump, and in many cases, the number-one reason. In the video, I feature a little excerpt from the Soho Forum where Walter Block debated Nick Gillespie on this question and was making that exact case, that, compared to Hillary, at least Trump would be a complete peacenik.

And so as the 2020 election draws nearer, I just wanted to go back and examine some of those arguments and talk to some of the antiwar advocates like Scott Horton, who, as you mentioned, never was very optimistic about Trump, and then Thaddeus Russell, who was pretty optimistic and was saying at the beginning of his term that this represented a huge shift, just to see how they thought that had held up. And Thad and Scott both told me that Trump's lasting contribution will have been to change the conversation on the right around what the purpose of the US military is. So that in its own is certainly something worth taking notice of.

He memorably called out Jeb Bush on the debate stage for defending his brother's Iraq War, and he got booed for it. But we all know how that story turned out. He vanquished Jeb Bush, humiliated him, and kind of forced the Republican base to admit that Bush's foreign policy was a mistake. So that was a big deal and a legitimate victory for the noninterventionist cause, as I said, just moving things in that direction.

He also gave speeches at the Institute for National Interest. He would say things like we can't force the Middle East to become a series of Western democracies through military force. I mean, this is just like right in line with what people like you've been saying, Ron Paul and Rand Paul have been saying. So he was saying a lot of the right things. He also expressed a general skepticism of international bodies like NATO. So, rhetorically, Trump, you can see why he held a lot of appeal to antiwar libertarian types. And the reality how it's played out has been a little more complicated.

WOODS: Right. Yeah, yeah, so we'll get into that. There are people who say, sometimes when we'll have a politician who's all talk and no action, and Trump says that about a lot of his opponents — like sometimes people will say Tulsi Gabbard, if she got in power, probably wouldn't have done the things that she said she would do, so I'm not interested. And my view was I'm still interested, not to the point that I would have supporting her, but I'm interested because talk is better than no talk and no action. At least talk gets other people talking. And unfortunately, a lot of our political conversations get their start from what some politician said, and so even if nothing comes of it, at least it gets people talking.

And also, you can't accuse Trump of being a wimp, the way they used to try to accuse the Democrats of being wimps because they at least supposedly wanted a more dovish foreign policy. I'm not sure I really believe that. But like this is another reason that I think Glenn Jacobs, otherwise known as Kane, the wrestler, who's now mayor of Knox County in Tennessee, I think he would be fantastic on a presidential debate stage, because first of all, he's the size of you and me combined times two. There is no way you can convince people that he's a wimp when he says it's stupid, we should be home.

WEISSMUELLER: Yeah.

WOODS: So the fact that people like that — it's a Nixon-to-China sort of thing. So that is a good thing. But as you say, okay, well, you said some things. Now what comes of it? Let's talk about Afghanistan particularly, because here's a case of even Trump himself said, normally, I really like to follow my instincts, and my instincts were let's get out of this war. And then, oh, boy, it's hard to listen to the rest of what he had to say. It's almost like he's reading a ransom note.

WEISSMUELLER: Yeah, he reversed course and said the thing that we hear a lot of politicians say — we've heard Obama say it once he gets elected, because Obama also ran as the relative peace candidate compared to John McCain, certainly. And even George W. Bush, when he was running, talked a big game about having a humble foreign policy and even called out the idea of nation building. And then once Trump got in there, he says in that speech that you're referencing, that once the people around me started laying out the situation, I realized we couldn't just leave because it's going to be chaos, so we really need to meet these conditions.

But at the same time, Trump is torn between these two different impulses, so he brokered this deal with the Taliban, and he is supposed to be taking troops out. Right now there's about 8,500 troops there. They want to bring it down by the fall to about 4,600. And that has been met with severe resistance. And of course, we don't know if Trump's going to be reelected, so who knows how that's all going to play out? But the idea that this 20-year war, this is kind of like the low-hanging fruit, in a way, in terms of getting troops out, like we should be able to wind this down when you elect someone as disruptive as Trump.

But it really shows you the kind of institutional obstacles that he's up against that, that anyone who's going into that office is going to be up against. I mean, Liz Cheney partnered with Democrats in the House Armed Services Committee to use the power of the purse in Congress to say no, you cannot withdraw troops from Afghanistan unless you meet these very vague conditions of stability, not letting these groups rise up again. Like it's not any specific benchmarks. It's just the general, everything kind of has to be perfect before we can leave, or we're not going to give you the money that you need to withdraw troops, which is a total inversion of what Congress should be doing with its power, which is using the power of the purse to restrain unwarranted foreign ventures. So it's a deeply troubling situation.

And if you want someone who's really going to do the job, it's got to be someone maybe like Kane or even Tulsi Gabbard. At least you know when Tulsi Gabbard opens her mouth, she's going to talk about ending regime-change wars. She's going to talk about foreign policy. So just someone who prioritizes that first, I've got to think that they're going to have a better chance of doing this than someone like Trump, who has a little bit of a short attention span.

WOODS: Yeah, that's exactly it that. I think, even though his message about Iraq resonated more with his base than people realize, because I think, even in South Carolina, there were veterans sitting watching that TV who don't speak out much, but they heard him say that and they knew he was right. They knew that that thing was a fiasco. They may not be vocal about it, but they knew. So I think that resonated more than people think. But it's not his biggest issue with his base, and sometimes he has to drag them along on it. So why invest all the political capital he has on something that seems hopeless when he has other fish to fry? Whereas I think a Ron Paul would have just — because that to him is the top thing. He just wouldn't have let go. He would have just kept on going and going and going and done whatever he needed to do to make it happen. But gee, as you say, you've got to be really committed to this.

And the unfortunate thing is — maybe this speaks to another topic that you've covered that we might hit on for a few minutes — the problem with the antiwar movements such as it is, it's extremely scattered. It tends to be partisan. It tends to disappear during the administrations of Democrats and stuff like that. There just isn't — I mean, the general public has a vague sense that this is a boondoggle, but they also know somebody, almost everybody knows somebody in the military, and they feel like they don't want to be viewed as being disrespectful toward them. So I think they kind of just grin and bear it.

WEISSMUELLER: Yeah, I produced a video shortly after the election of President Obama, and Thaddeus Russell was featured in that one too; it's just called "What Happened to the Antiwar Movement?" because a lot of us who are interested in the issue noticed that these massive protests that happened under the Bush administration during the run-up and kind of continuance of the Iraq War just disappeared, but the war making didn't disappear. And I mean, part of that is just fatigue, and then part of it is just pure partisanship. I mean, there were surveys of the antiwar movement that showed the Democratic partisanship of the makeup of the movement just totally almost disappearing. It was pretty much weirdo independents and libertarians that were left behind, and some far-left communist-type people as well. So that was kind of the rump that was left behind after Obama took office and then kind of took warfare in a totally different direction with the emergence of drone campaigns.

And that is an unfortunate aspect. Like these wars have been going on for so long now that, even now that Trump is in power, there could be an antiwar movement. The left could be reinvigorated by that, but that's not really where their focus is anymore. It's kind of just like this is just background noise now. Meanwhile, people are dying. We're continuing to create radical groups and fund radical groups in the Middle East that will eventually likely turn against us. So the whole dance is still going, but nobody's really listening to the music.

WOODS: Well, and also, it seems to me the foreign policy just gets less and less significant as domestic problems pile up. I mean, really with the COVID problem and the lockdowns and Black Lives Matter and unrest that could be ignited at any time in the cities, it seems much harder to persuade somebody that the fate of democracy in Uzbekistan is their primary concern.

WEISSMUELLER: Yeah, also, I think that the technological aspect has really distanced people from it, because so much of our warfare now is drone-based or at least air-based. And in the case of Yemen and Somalia, it's not even always direct US involvement; it's like we are funding the Saudis to drop bombs and providing them with the bombs to drop and giving them the strategic lay of the land, but not actually directly doing it, but still totally implicated in it. And certainly, the people who are dying by the hundreds of thousands, their families certainly see it that way. So we have this psychological distance from it now, so that's a tough problem to overcome to make people really care about it, when maybe their cousin or their brother isn't getting sent over there, but they're sitting in a portable in Nevada flying a drone and dropping the bombs that way.

WOODS: One of the things people say in defense of Trump is that he hasn't started any new wars. And it's pretty sad when you're reduced to that. You know, that that's the best we can come up with. But compared to others, that is at least something. But what's the other side of that ledger?

WEISSMUELLER: Well, he hasn't started any new wars, and sure, I will give him credit for that. I am not sure that he has made the world overall more peaceful, because there have been certain regions where tensions have really been ramped up. I mean, we know that he tore up the Iran nuclear deal, and what did Iran do after that deal was torn up? They started enriching more uranium, they started becoming less transparent. Trump pulled out of the Russian Open Skies Treaty, and Russia has also decreased its transparency. He's ramped up tensions with China via the trade war, and we've also put more nuclear weapons out into the Pacific Ocean somewhere.

And nobody likes to think about the nuclear question. It's a very uncomfortable thing to ponder. And you'll start to seem a little bit like paranoid or frantic when you like seriously start to talk about what could happen with nuclear weapons. But I think Trump in general with dealing with these nuclear powers has probably pushed us more in a worse direction. And that that does make me nervous.

We also know that from the beginning, he had Iran hawks around him. Michael Flynn, he had some good ideas in terms of rethinking the Middle East strategy, but he's always been an Iran hawk, and Trump has always seemed to be on board with that. So tensions with Iran are not a good thing, and I don't know how that's going to play out. And even with Russia, despite the way Trump, his relationship with Russia has been portrayed, it's not exactly like tensions have been totally eased there. And depending on what happens after the election, that's another potentially volatile situation.

WOODS: This whole thing reminds me of one of the most, I don't know, elusive things about Trump — mystifying, stupefying — is his personnel choices. I remember seeing his base cheering when he got rid of John Bolton, but it's not like John Bolton is a built-in feature of the White House. He brought on John Bolton. Or he was against Elliott Abrams because Abrams had opposed Trump in the primaries or something, in the election, but that's not the reason to be against Elliott Abrams; it's because he's part of the foreign policy establishment and you're supposed to be here to be a bull in a china shop there, and you're surrounding yourself by Mike Pompeo and all these other people. And then you wonder why it seems like there are leaks everywhere, you're being undermined at every turn. Again, part of his lack of curiosity and his impatience involves not even knowing where to go if he wanted to surround himself with people who want to implement what he says he wants. He doesn't even know who those people would be.

WEISSMUELLER: Yeah, it's a big problem, and I think part of the problem is — I mean, first of all, we know that the John Bolton choice is sort of a mystery. We have some ideas of why he did that. One possibility is he liked watching him on Fox News and was familiar with him. Another possibility is he thought just kind of having John Bolton would make his foreign adversaries a little bit more nervous, and he was a bargaining chip, or he was going to have John Bolton on a leash, but he could always unleash him if he needed to, so it was kind of just like making his administration look a little more tough.

WOODS: I had actually never heard that theory. It makes so much sense.

WEISSMUELLER: Yeah, I mean, that's one theory. Getting into the psychology of Trump only leads to madness.

WOODS: Yeah, right, but that's as plausible as anything I've heard.

WEISSMUELLER: Yeah. But then with the personnel issue, also, it's just that these ideas have been so marginalized in DC for so long that there's not a —

WOODS: Yeah, where would you even go?

WEISSMUELLER: Yeah, and that I think is the way forward that we need to focus on. Like Trump has opened up this conversation, and now we need to build on that. There is the new Quincy Institute, which is trying to do that in DC, trying to make a serious think-tank that walks through the logic of non-interventionism and how can we actually start methodically extracting ourselves from these wars in a way that's politically sustainable, because when we start pulling out of Afghanistan, if we ever actually do that, there will be chaotic actions. We just saw today that in Afghanistan a prison was raided by ISIS, apparently, and they freed 2,000 people out of there. So this stuff is going to happen, and people are going to say this is this is a huge mistake. So we've got to figure out a way to do this, and that does start with personnel who've thought this through. And I'm hoping that that's one thing that will come out of all this, is that that kind of base will start to be built up so that if we ever get another person with these noninterventionist instincts back into office, that they'll have more of a pool to draw from.

WOODS: Well, as we wrap up today, I want to close with a personal question, if I may. We've been saying that holding a view outside the parameters established by the bipartisan foreign policy consensus is unpopular and unusual and so on. So how did you yourself come to hold these opinions? Because I used to be a neocon just because in my day, there was no internet, and I thought there were two choices and so I picked one. But I eventually learned the error of my ways. Were you the same way, or were you right from the beginning, so to speak?

WEISSMUELLER: No, I was kind of apolitical, but I was in college during the Iraq War, and I had a good friend who was in the Marines, and I would write to him as he was going through basic training, and just having that relationship and really thinking about, wow, why — already by then I could see that this was not really about making America safer. And I was just like, why is my friend going to Iraq right now? This makes no sense to me. This is not making us safer from terrorist attacks. That story quickly started to not make sense to me.

And basically the Bush-Kerry election happened, and I looked at these two guys, and Bush obviously was not the right choice, but even I started listening to what John Kerry was saying, and he wasn't really saying that he was going to end the war in Iraq in any expeditious manner. And so I started kind of poking around, and I found the Libertarian Party and I saw that they actually were in favor of ending the Iraq War. And I started digging more into what libertarianism was all about, and I thought, oh, this is an interesting philosophy that aligns with a lot of what I already kind of have a general sense for. So I started building my beliefs there.

And then the Ron Paul campaign happened in 2008, and he was the one person on stage that was making any sense about this. And so that really kind of solidified my views and feelings about the foreign policy issue. So I'm definitely on the same page as people like Thaddeus and Scott Horton, who say that foreign policy really should be the number-one thing when you're looking at a presidential candidate, especially, because that's where they have the most power. I just hope that going forward, we're able to find someone who really prioritizes that instead of kind of talks a big game and then doesn't have the kind of depth of knowledge, strategic thinking and just passion to make it happen.

WOODS: I really do think, just my impression is that the general public is bored with the issue at this point. It's not like you're seeing images of children being napalmed like you used to in the Vietnam War and stuff like that, Agent Orange or whatever. You're not seeing any of that. And it's out of sight, out of mind. So I think the only way to really run on it right now would be to point out how anomalous it is that right now we've got all these problems in the country and whatever you could even say, we don't have enough masks or this or that, we don't have enough supplies for this and that, but for some reason, we have all the resources in the world to send all these people this far away to do heaven knows what. Just to try to connect it to domestic problems, because that's the only thing that gets people's attention. And if that's what works, then do it. And it would be nice to hear Trump talk that way, but I fear that foreign policy in this election — I mean, look, we've only got a few more months till the election. I think it's just going to be invisible.

WEISSMUELLER: That's also something that Scott Horton was bringing up to me when I was probing him a little bit of like, how would this become a salient issue? And he said either it would be some sort of like horrific disaster, which we hope doesn't happen, overseas to our troops that really focuses attention, or there is kind of the reality of we're running out of money. And with all the spending that's been happening through the lockdown, that might be the reality that's upon us sooner, is we're just not going to be able to afford that. And I think that's a case that more and more Americans might start to get soon.

WOODS: Well, Zach, I appreciate your time. I'm going to link people to the video that we've been jumping off from at [TomWoods.com/1705](https://www.tomwoods.com/1705). I'll also link to the video you did with Thad on the antiwar movement. Why not? Let's put that out there as well, so people can get more of a taste of what you've been up to. And thanks again.

WEISSMUELLER: Thank you, Tom.