

America's Anti-Immigrant 'Atmosphere'

A hostile U.S. "atmosphere" toward a wide range of immigrants, not just Muslims, has followed President Trump's travel ban aimed at six mostly Muslim countries, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

Dennis J Bernstein

Beyond the specific language of President Trump's revised travel ban aimed at six predominantly Muslim countries, the executive order creates a climate of hostility toward a much larger number of immigrants, says Indian historian Vijay Prashad.

Following the roll-out of Trump's executive order, I spoke with Professor Prashad, author of more than 15 books and nine anthologies, including most recently *The Death of the Nation and the Future of the Arab Revolution* and *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter*.

We also spoke about allegations of Russian interference in the U.S. elections, and what a Trump presidency might mean for US-Israeli-Palestinian policies.

Dennis Bernstein: Let's talk about some of Trump's opening salvos and let's come in through the travel door. You've been doing a lot of traveling lately.

Vijay Prashad: Well, you know, the new travel ban is out and I suppose narrower in its scope than the January 27th order. But it's nonetheless quite significant, in that he has, President Trump has, decided that six countries, not seven—he's removed Iraq from the list—must have its citizens be under further scrutiny if they want to come to the United States. And I think what people need to understand is that the actual letter of the travel ban, of the executive order, is less important than the atmosphere that such executive orders create.

The atmosphere of this executive order, for instance, has already created a great deal of sensitivity...shall I put it like that? Sensitivity among people who work for the Customs and Border service, at the border. And we've had, already, dozens of stories of people who come from none of these countries, none of these six named countries, people who are in fact nationals of countries such as Canada, being not only stopped at the border, but turned away.

So, I think it's important to see the language of this particular executive order, not for itself—it shouldn't be studied just for itself—but also the kind of atmosphere created. It's almost anti... not only immigrant but xenophobic atmosphere. Hatred of strangers, hatred of different people, that seems to have entered quite publicly into American political discussion.

DB: And, we are, of course, now seeing some of the things that many of us feared in terms of the expanding sweeps, by the Department of Homeland Security, what's taking place at the border. This is something that has changed, if you will, the character, the intensity, of life now at a certain point, in a certain way.

VP: Yes, and you are in California, where there is a preponderance of people who will easily be mistaken, let us say, by federal officials for being immigrants. An attitude has returned to the United States that there is something called "an American." Somebody who is white, somebody who is perhaps, let's even put it in a more narrow way, Dennis, somebody who is Anglo-Saxon, somebody who is, perhaps even narrower, Protestant. And this person has once again emerged as the actual, kind of, muscle of what it means to be an American. And everybody else is, in a sense, has to be considered outside that definition. I think this is very disturbing.

This is after a generation and a half of what was known as multiculturalism, an attempt to expand the concept of "American," to be more inclusive. To allow, for instance, one's imagination to accept that people who migrate to this country have title to it, they're likely to feel comfortable in it. And, I think that the Trump movement, the very cruel populism of the Trump movement, has once more suffocated the idea of "American."

It's taken the idea of "American" by the throat and it has garroted it. And it's said that only a very narrow interpretation should be allowed. So, when one sees pictures of ICE agents at the jet-way as people are getting off domestic planes, asking to check out identification. This smells like this suffocated idea of "American."

And I'm afraid the price for this is on the one side going to be paid, of course, by those who don't look like "Americans," but really the price for this is going to be paid by the United States in general, as people from around the world decide that they are not really looking forward to a holiday in the United States, and as people outside the country think, "I don't want to go study there."

And it's almost as if Donald Trump has had kind of a syllable error. And rather than conducted a war against terrorism, he has decided to conduct a war against tourism. And the effects of that are going to be quite catastrophic.

DB: Let's go to "the Russians are coming" again. Now ... if you read it from the sort of corporate press and the Washington elite, and the intelligence community, it's "Donald Trump is on the strings of Vladimir Putin." In fact, through Donald Trump, Putin crashed the U.S. elections and made it possible for him to be the president. Do you buy that scenario?

VP: Well, let's first say that if you were asleep for the last 40 years—[if] you were the 20th century Rip Van Winkle, and you woke up yesterday, or this month—you'd think that the Soviet Union had won the Cold War, and that the United States had been defeated. It's extraordinary that there is this kind of paranoia about the reach of Russian power. It tells you a great deal, in a sense, about the anxiety inside the American ruling elites, that they believe that the Russians have such immense capacity, and that their capacity, therefore, is not as immense.

This is something that people should consider, particularly when you look, for instance, at the defense budget of the United States, now with a \$54 billion increase by Donald Trump. Most likely the defense budget will go up to about \$700 billion a year. By the way, that \$54 billion increase of the U.S. budget, it's the increase of the budget, that's almost the total annual Russian military budget.

So Russia is actually a fragment, has a fragment of the power of the United States. And yet, the United States is somehow hyperventilating about Russia's influence inside the United States. I think people really need to take a step back and consider this. Now, whether the Russians actually influenced the elections, that's a separate matter. And, of course, that will require perhaps some kind of investigation of e-mail servers and things that are beyond my capacity.

But, clearly, there are some problems in American elections. And those problems may not have everything to do with the Russians. They may have to do with the desiccated nature of American politics in the first place.

Look at what the American electorate was offered. On the one side Hillary Clinton, who was carrying the flag of the status quo, and on the other side Donald Trump, with incredibly dangerous words coming out of his lips. That was hardly a choice for people. So there is a kind of very desiccated political environment. I think that's one of the things that people need to take seriously about this election.

The second thing they need to take seriously is this is the first presidential election after the withdrawal of the Voting Rights Act. So a very large numbers of people around the country were disenfranchised from the ballot box. I think that—the removal of the Voting Rights Act—is probably more consequential for the election results than any Russian meddling.

DB: And, of course, you have, added on to that, the elevation of Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III to be the attorney general, who has spent a lifetime trying to disenfranchise black people from voting, if not actually supporting

terrorism against them. It doesn't look good at that level.

VP: Well, it's an incredible moment, that he actually gave us. First, his entire name, a confederate name, if there ever was one. Jeff Sessions has, as you said rightly, spent his life suppressing not only the black vote, but the black imagination. At least trying to suppress the black imagination. And being largely unsuccessful because of the push back of the forces of black liberation movements, civil rights groups, etc.

But now, as those groups also have been largely atomized, broken up, or have become incorporated into the ruling structure, the power of those groups has been weakened. And it has allowed this kind of "revenge politics" of Mr. Session to be an important part of the coalition of Donald Trump.

Who would have imagined from, let's say, the 1990's that the American fascist movement, the Ku Klux Klan and others, would have representatives inside the White House? It was thought in the 1990's that that kind of neoliberal[ism] didn't require that kind of constituency to maintain their policy in this country. But, of course, now they are back in the guise of people like Steve Bannon.

And, by the way, these killings, and this is me just speaking personally now, these killings of South Asians, whether in Kansas or in South Carolina, people might say, "Well, these are just one-off incidents." It's very important to remember that Bannon has a very special antipathy to Asian workers in the high tech industry. And people in your listening area who work in the high tech industry should pay attention to this. In 2015 he wanted to scrap the H-1B visa. This is a visa for high tech workers.

And in an interview with then-candidate Donald Trump, when Bannon said this, Trump cautioned him and said "No, no, we want talented people inside the United States." But it was Bannon's views which prevailed. And then during the election campaign Trump campaigned repeatedly for the withdrawal of H1B, that is, for allowing high tech workers to enter the country. And it was Bannon who, in another interview in 2016, in talking about migration, said that these migrants shouldn't be allowed in because, as he put it, "Jeffersonian democracy is not in their DNA." This is very harsh language against sections of the population, very racialized language. And this is, of course, front and center now, in the White House.

DB: And, do you want to just say a word or two about this idea of putting in charge of each agency somebody who is there to dismantle the agency, and ... that's the structural program that's being unfolded under Steve Bannon and Trump, right? This is to dismantle any attempt at regulation of corporate power.

VP: One of the interesting features of this Trump movement from what you're bringing up in terms of deregulation, is that there is an internal problem in this movement. This movement has promised people economic sovereignty. In other words, it said that we'll put America first. Americans should get jobs first, etc... and by the way, again, that word "American" as the modifier is very important. It refers back to what I said earlier. What do they mean by American?

So, at any rate, this idea of economic sovereignty has been the main plank. They've been banging on this plank saying they're going to make sure Americans get jobs, etc. But they're banking on the fact that if they both cut tax rates and they allow for massive deregulation this will somehow spur on American capitalists to invest money inside the United States.

There's no evidence, in the last twenty years, that this sector of the American population is interested in massive investment inside the United States. In fact, I would argue that this section of the population has essentially gone on tax strike, and has withdrawn this massive amount of capital either overseas, or into Wall Street. It's not been interested in making the kind of investments that create jobs.

But because, I think, Bannon and Trump recognize—they're not stupid people—I think they recognize that the demand for economic sovereignty is not going to be met. In other words, they're not going to be able to create the millions of jobs necessary to counter what they call "American carnage," the destruction of the jobs in America. Because they won't be able to do that, then they argue very quickly, from economic sovereignty, they argue for cultural sovereignty.

And that is why issues such as build a wall against Mexico, get Mexico to pay for it, stop the Muslims from coming into the country, stop H1B workers from coming in. These elements of so-called cultural sovereignty become more important for them. And these are going to create massive social strife in the country that is along so-called race lines.

What we're going to get, instead of a class war to create economic sovereignty in the country, is a race war. It is going to target certain minorities for punishment. Whether it's going to be people who look like Mexicans, who'll be targeted by ICE agents, or it will be vigilante groups out there shooting Indians, going after Muslims, etc. I think we are on the precipice of some kind of race war. And I'm not sure the great resistance that is building up in the country recognizes this fully, and confronts it fully. I think this could be a very dangerous period for the United States.

DB: Let me focus you a bit on the Middle East, just two more areas there. Let's start with, I guess you could call it, Trump's new peace team for Israel. He's

got his son-in-law, who is a real Jew, we've been told that, excuse me. And we've got, well, the implications of moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. Your thoughts on this?

VP: Well, look, Dennis, this is an interesting moment. On the one side you have Trump moving with his very harsh, well-known position, "let's go in and move the embassy, the U.S. embassy, to Jerusalem, and let's ... stick our finger in the face of the international consensus." You have that on the one side.

On the other side, you have a very curious moment when Benjamin Netanyahu came to the United States. When Trump, in his very casual, folksy way... and I think he disarmed Netanyahu in this, [when he] said "You know, I don't care what you do, one state, two state, as long as everybody is agreed, we're behind it." I mean, this is a curious moment. And Netanyahu sort of giggled his way out of it. I think he was really quite surprised to hear that.

DB: Yeah!

VP: And this idea of walking away from the two-state solution, which he proposed, within twelve hours his ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, had to quickly say that "No, no we're still committed to the two-state solution."

I think there is a great deal of incoherence and chaos in the Trump White House as far as foreign policy is concerned. I honestly don't think they know what they are doing when they make some of their pronouncements. They've had to pull back on a number of them, including Trump's statement about "Let's go in there and take the oil," as he was talking about Iraq. Then, quickly, his defense secretary had to come in and say "No, no he didn't mean that." So, I think there's a great deal of incoherence in terms of world affairs. I really don't think they know what they're talking about.

I think that Trump's statement that the United States needs to build twelve aircraft carriers... these are kind of the ramblings of somebody who doesn't understand how the world works. At this point the United States has about one hundred times greater military power than any other country in the world. Russia barely has one aircraft carrier, China has one aircraft carrier, the United States has several. Why build six more aircraft carriers? [It would be an] enormous waste of the public resources that could be used towards schools, parks, etc. So, I think there's a great deal of incoherence.

I think Trump likes an attitude of belligerence around foreign policy. But I think here the establishment that surrounds him is going to coax him through the consensus. This, of course, doesn't mean, Dennis, that the consensus is good.

The consensus is often terrible. So it's not clear that this is a good thing.

For instance, the one area where I think some modulation is necessary as far as U.S. policy is concerned, is with regard to the great hostility against Russia. The attempt to engage Russia and China is not going to produce good dividends for the United States.

And you don't have to take it from me. People can go and read Henry Kissinger, who, as you well know, is still alive. Henry Kissinger has been saying the same thing, that this kind of intensified rhetoric against China and Russia is really not productive. And even this strategy, of trying to separate out China and Russia, is not going to work. For in this one small area where Trump was saying a few interesting things, he was immediately closed down. So, I think that the establishment is going to prevail on foreign policy. And I think, of course, that is never a good idea.

DB: And, just to be clear, the point is that the bit of light coming through Trump policies was that, unlike Clinton, he wasn't convinced that we needed a no-fly zone, all-out war [in Syria], we needed to push NATO onto the border of Russia, and that there might be another way. This is really what got him into trouble, right? Taking this on, and the sort of the... the permanent state, the neocons, and the new, hawk liberals just couldn't put up with this.

VP: Well, exactly. Look, what did Obama's policy of trying to isolate Russia... if you extrapolate from the elements of Obama's Eurasia policy... the policy regarding Russia, Europe and China, what you can assume is Mr. Obama was attempting to isolate Russia, and somehow break its ties to China. You can extrapolate that from the kinds of things that they were doing. The Ukraine policy, the Syria policy to some extent, mainly the Ukraine policy.

So, if that was the case, it didn't work. Because over the course of the Obama presidency, as Russia was further isolated out of Europe, it strengthened its ties with China. And, for instance, the Russians decided to pivot the economic, kind of, relationship, from trying to sell their natural gas and oil to Europe, to doing so with China. So, military ties increased between China and Russia, strategic ties increased, and economic ties increased.

So here comes Mr. Trump, and perhaps he was trying a newer strategy: befriend Russia and try to attack China. Once again, to break the link between the two. But if that was the game he was playing, it would not necessarily have worked. Because, by now, the Russians and the Chinese are quite integrated, in at least the strategic and military aspects, if not also the economic aspects.

But still, the kind of dialing down of the tension around Eurasia would have

helped everybody, including the Europeans. But I think there is a sort of an old Cold War mentality that still strikes at the heart of the American establishment which is why it was so easy to conjure it up, around this thing that Russians are interfering in the United States.

It's old Cold War feuds that have emerged in a new generation, not just in people who experienced and grew up in that era. So, yes, I think that there would have been something quite refreshing ... with a rethinking about Russia-China-United States relations. It would have been good for the world to have had a dialing down of tensions. But, of course, that was not to be.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
