

# Trump's Fake Anti-War Posturing Works for Him

*Democrats have ceded opposition to the military-industrial complex to a belligerent fraud.*

By Jeet Heer

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Donald Trump takes questions at a White House press conference. (Tasos Katopodis / Getty Images)

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**I**n his Labor Day press briefing, Donald Trump blasted the top brass of the American military in terms rarely heard outside of the most radical pacifist sects, describing the Pentagon leadership as greedy warmongers. The context for Trump's remarks was his hostile response to reports that he had called fallen soldiers "losers" and suckers."

As Trump explained to the press, "I'm not saying the military is in love with me, the soldiers are. The top people in the Pentagon probably aren't because they want to do nothing but fight wars so that all of those wonderful companies that make the bombs and make the planes and make everything else, stay happy." Trump used similar terms to attack his rival Joe Biden, saying the

Democratic presidential nominee “sent our youth to fight in these crazy, endless wars.” The same day, Trump retweeted a Glenn Greenwald post that featured a video of Dwight Eisenhower denouncing the military-industrial complex.

Trump’s claims to be a closet peacenik might seem improbable to his opponents, but they have been a part of his political brand since he started running for president in 2015. In competing for the Republican nomination that year, he distinguished himself from his rivals by claiming, falsely, to have opposed the Iraq War. About that war, Trump said, “We have done a tremendous disservice not only to the Middle East—we’ve done a tremendous disservice to humanity. The people that have been killed, the people that have been wiped away—and for what?”

In August, the Trump campaign released Facebook ads that appropriated the psychedelic look of anti-war posters in the 1960s. “President Trump will NEVER stop fighting to restore peace around the world, and now he needs to know he has your support!” one ad read. “Sign NOW to show your support for the end of ENDLESS WARS!”

It’s easy enough to denounce Trump’s anti-war posturing as hypocritical, indeed as outright fraudulent. He is, after all, the president who has recklessly escalated hostilities against Iran and China in ways that could easily lead to war. As *Politico* details, “Since becoming president, Donald Trump has overseen historic increases in defense budgets, fawned over military equipment, installed a number of defense industry insiders in top Pentagon positions and made a major push to sell weapons overseas.”

Surveying Trump’s record, Ryan Cooper of *The Week* argues that the president “does not actually care at all about corrupt contractors or seriously rolling back the last 20 years of pointless war. He seems to have a moderate aversion to starting new full-

blown ground invasions, and has occasionally withdrawn a few troops here and there—but he also likes drone assassinations, which have sharply increased under his administration, both in tempo and in the rate of civilian casualties.”

But these charges of hypocrisy carry limited weight given how many voters buy what Trump is selling, even if it can be shown to be a shoddy product. Trump is a con man, but his con only works because it answers to real needs. Quack doctors usually make money by offering cures for diseases that flummox the medical establishment. The bipartisan mainstream political establishment refuses to take up the cause of scaling back the American empire, creating an opening for mountebanks like Trump.

Trump keeps up the absurd pretense of being anti-war because he knows that after nearly 20 years of the interminable War on Terror, many Americans are attracted to the argument that the country should avoid feckless imperial adventures and adopt a less interventionist foreign policy.

In 2016, Trump was able to get away with claiming to be anti-war because he had no record. In 2020, he has a record, but one where the consequences of his actions are ambiguous enough that he can still hope to fool some voters. He hasn't started any large-scale wars. The ramp up in violence under Trump has been through drones, a continuation of Barack Obama's policy and much more acceptable to voters than full-scale conflicts with high American casualties.

A 2017 study by Boston University political science professor Douglas Krinera and University of Minnesota Law professor Francis Shen offered evidence that Trump's anti-war posturing helped him win the presidency. In their study, which was posted on the Social Science Research Network, Krinera and Shen correlated support for Trump with counties that had suffered high

rates of military casualties in the 21st century. “Even controlling in a statistical model for many other alternative explanations,” they write, “we find that there is a significant and meaningful relationship between a community’s rate of military sacrifice and its support for Trump. Indeed, our results suggest that if three states key to Trump’s victory—Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin—had suffered even a modestly lower casualty rate, all three could have flipped from red to blue and sent Hillary Clinton to the White House.”

Trump has been able to get away with his anti-war con game because Democrats, with the notable exception of Bernie Sanders, have been reluctant to attack him as a warmonger. Instead, both Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020 have focused not on Trump’s belligerence but his personal character flaws: his erratic behavior, his alienation of allies, and his possibly corrupt ties to foreign dictators.

These are all worth criticizing, but to focus on them at the expense of calling out Trump’s fake anti-war rhetoric is to cede valuable political space to Trump. Mainstream Democrats like Clinton and Biden are shy of tackling Trump on these grounds because they think there is more political advantage to be gained from winning over disaffected Republicans, many of whom are national security hawks. Clinton and Biden have both gone so far as to try to out-hawk Trump. Clinton argued that Trump was too friendly to the Palestinians, while Biden has suggested that Trump has been too soft on China.

The shortsighted pursuit of Republican hawks means that the only major-party presidential candidate who can speak to popular anti-war sentiment is Trump.

As Matt Duss, foreign policy adviser to Bernie Sanders, [notes](#), “DC interventionists see Trump’s fake appeals to antiwar sentiment as a cynical opportunity to discredit those ideas. We should see them as proof that a broad, transpartisan antiwar coalition is in the making, and a new and durable [foreign policy] consensus can be built.”

Perversely, we’re in a situation where Trump is president but running as a critic of an unpopular foreign policy consensus, while Biden is the challenger who wants to uphold the status quo. The devil should never be allowed to get all the good tunes, and Trump certainly shouldn’t be the main anti-war voice in American politics.

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