

You Can't Beat Trump by Saying You are Like Trump: The Mike Pompeo Presidential Campaign That Never Was

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President Donald Trump has drawn significant Republican opposition to his 2024 election bid. Much of that opposition has come from former Trump administration officials who are practicing a form of strategic silence by saying they will continue similar policies while using a more restrained rhetorical style. One of those officials was former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. This essay examines the 2024 presidential campaign of Secretary Pompeo and uses it as the basis to make some informed predictions concerning the election next year.

Keywords: 2024 Presidential campaign, Donald Trump, Mike Pompeo, rhetoric of silence, strategic noise, strategic silence

Former President Donald Trump has achieved something remarkable in American politics. With an unconventional speaking style, he rallied tens of millions of people to vote for him in two consecutive elections. He also appears to be a strong candidate for (re?)-election in 2024. However, his unconventional style has increasingly caused resistance amongst those who might otherwise be his allies. Some in Republican Party circles are pursuing the same 2024 nomination that President Trump seeks. It has been over a century since a president has sought election without being the current officeholder, so there isn't a strong playbook for how those candidates should pursue their goals.

That lack of a strong template has already caused some candidates to stumble. For example, Mike Pompeo served as Secretary of State under President Trump and proto-launched a campaign focused on his claimed foreign policy achievements. That campaign stumbled badly, although Secretary Pompeo continues to maintain an online presence which very much looks like the foundations for a potential future campaign. In this essay, I argue that Secretary Pompeo's campaign failed because it is very difficult to capture the strengths of President Trump's political communication style without also capturing its weaknesses. Put differently, there are many voters who like President Trump and many who dislike him, but very few who want a candidate who is kind of like him. In order to build my argument, I start by attempting to define President Trump's style. I then outline the Pompeo proto-campaign to explain how he was attempting to run in what I and

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others have called the “Trump Light” lane. While doing so, I will discuss why I was studying his campaign as well as what I assumed his chances of success to have been. Next, I compare and contrast those two campaigns as I develop my argument that President Trump’s rhetorical strengths cannot be separated from his weaknesses. I conclude this essay with projections for what this might mean for the 2024 primary field.

Attempting to Define Donald Trump’s Rhetorical Style

First, it is not my goal in this essay to write the comprehensive guide to the rhetorical stylings of Donald John Trump. That would require rather more space than I have, and it is not the point here. Rather, I wish to give a broad overview of his rhetorical choices so that I can contrast them with the choices made by Secretary Pompeo. When I say “rhetorical choices,” I do not mean that in any derogatory sense. Rather, I draw on the Aristotelian definition of rhetoric as the available means of persuasion. In other words, when I speak of President Trump’s rhetorical choices I speak about how he attempted to persuade voters to join his campaign or otherwise take actions in his favor. To define President Trump’s rhetorical style, it is perhaps easiest to define what it was not.

To define what Trump’s rhetorical style is not, one useful concept is intentional strategic silence. I want to be careful here, because the term “silence” is used many ways in the scholarly literature. I very specifically mean the intentional choice of an otherwise empowered actor to remain silent when speech was expected of and available to him. Barry Brummett defined “political strategic silence” as “the refusal of a public figure to communicate verbally when that refusal (1) violates expectations, (2) draws public attributions of fairly predictable meanings, and (3) seems intentional and directed at an audience.”¹ In other words, not every time someone fails to speak is an act of intentional strategic silence. Rather, there must be some expectation that the person have spoken, and their silence must be for some purpose. Brummett also noted that silence can include statements which are less than what might be said.² I previously explained this idea of relative silence by saying it “might include a change of tone, location, or other factors that result in the delivery of a less forceful message.”³ One can say *something* and still be practicing an intentional strategic silence.

The “delivery of a less forceful message” is not the rhetorical preference of President Trump. For example, in his November 16, 2022 address that he would again seek the presidency he said, “There has never been anything like it, this great movement of ours. Never been anything like it, and perhaps there will never be anything like it again.”⁴ In the same speech, he also said, “Together we built the greatest economy in the history of the world.”⁵ These statements are not, on their face, either good or bad. Rather, they argue that restraint is not President Trump’s stylistic preference.

¹ Barry Brummett, “Towards a Theory of Silence as a Political Strategy,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, (1980): 289.

² Brummett, “Towards a Theory of Silence as a Political Strategy,” 289-290.

³ William F Harlow, “Strategic Silence,” in *Encyclopedia of Public Relations, Second Edition, Volume II*, ed. Robert L. Heath (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 887.

⁴ Chris Cillizza, “The 51 Most Outlandish Lines From Donald Trump’s Announcement Speech,” November 16, 2022, accessed June 6, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/16/politics/trump-campaign-announcement-speech-2024/index.html>. The original speech is Donald Trump, Former President Trump’s 2024 Campaign Announcement, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?524197-1/president-trumps-2024-campaign-announcement>, accessed on October 9, 2023. The relevant content is at 3:40.

⁵ I originally noticed this in reading Cillizza, “The 51 Most Outlandish Lines.” The original speech is Donald Trump, Former President Trump’s 2024 Campaign Announcement, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?524197-1/president-trumps-2024-campaign-announcement>, accessed on October 9, 2023. The relevant audio is at 5:12.

I could go on for some length about the outspokenness of the former president, but perhaps the *Washington Post* summarized it best in claiming that during his presidency he made false or misleading claims 30,573 times.⁶ That number may be an exaggeration, because Trump made himself available to the press more frequently than did his predecessors and, as Jim A. Kuypers⁷ pointed out, the press sometimes ignored the context he provided for his statements. However, regardless of what the exact numbers of false or misleading claims is, the central truth to which it points is that President Trump has long been willing to make a large volume of public statements without regard to how they would be perceived by others. This all argues that Trump consistently practices something other than a strategic silence.

To say that Trump's rhetorical strategy is **not** silence, however, does not tell us much about what the strategy actually is. President Trump routinely goes well beyond not being silent. Intentional strategic silence is a concept which applies when speech is expected. What happens, however, when silence is the baseline expectation of the audience? It does not seem as if President Trump prefers to meet that particular expectation. Indeed, it seems like he is inclined to make the most forceful statements possible in the most public forums as often as he possibly might.

For lack of a better term, I call this a *rhetoric of noise* or, perhaps, *political strategic noise* or *intentional strategic noise*. A rhetoric of noise is not any statement which might be made. Rather, it is the statement of someone from whom silence is expected. I do not mean the statements of people from whom silence is expected because they are unempowered or disempowered, but rather the statements of those who are normally fully empowered to speak but of whom silence is expected in a particular situation. Much like a rhetoric of silence, a rhetoric of noise is relative to what might be said. A person who is expected to say, "I am proud of my accomplishments" and who instead says, "My accomplishments are the greatest. The best. Nobody has ever had accomplishments like mine" would be practicing a rhetoric of noise. Alternatively, making such a statement repeatedly, or in an unexpected setting, might also be construed as a strategic noise.

My goal here, however, is not to provide definition to "noise" or "silence" as particular rhetorical concepts. Rather, my goal is to briefly define the rhetorical practice of the most recent former president. Speech is routinely expected of American presidents, and I have argued in several essays that some have instead advanced their agendas with the use of a strategic silence. For example, on the collapse of the Berlin Wall President George H.W. Bush advanced key American policy goals through limiting his public rhetoric when many were clamoring for a more aggressive response from him.⁸ This phenomenon is not only limited to American presidents. For example, in 2017 Saudi Arabia attempted to advance their interests in a dispute with Qatar through using a strategic silence.⁹

⁶ Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, "Trump's False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 Over 4 Years," *Washington Post*, January 24, 2021. Accessed June 6, 2023 from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>.

⁷ Jim A. Kuypers, "News Media Framing of the Donald J. Trump and Hillary Clinton 2016 Presidential Nomination Acceptance Speeches: Terministic Screens and the Discover of the Worldview and Bias of the Press," in Jim A. Kuypers, Ed. *The 2016 American Presidential Campaign and the News Media: Implications for the American Republic and Democracy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018): 101-132.

⁸ William Forrest Harlow, "And the Wall Came Tumbling Down: Bush's Rhetoric of Silence during German Reunification," in *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H.W. Bush*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 37-55.

⁹ William F Harlow, "Strategic Silence as a Frame for Understanding the 2017 Embargo Against Qatar," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 7 (2017): 217-226.

Silences are strategic when speech is what was expected. However, silence is sometimes the reaction expected of public figures. President Trump seems disinclined to practice that silence, and the instances are so frequent that they might well be strategic. He seems to practice this rhetoric of noise more frequently than any U.S. political figure in recent times, and it has served him well—he won the presidency in 2016, and while he lost his 2020 re-election bid he did so with the second highest number of popular votes ever recorded for a presidential candidate. That leaves those in his party who seek to define themselves as an alternative to him with a difficult choice. They can either emulate the former president's rhetorical style and hope to do it better than does he, or they can hope to advance a policy agenda similarly acceptable to Republican primary voters using a different rhetorical style. Secretary Pompeo choose the later. He advocated for many of the same policies, and indeed his campaign materials quite often focused on the work he did as an official in the Trump administration. However, while one cannot reasonably call Pompeo silent his stylistic choices were rather different than the noise used by Trump himself.

What Evidence Do We Have That Pompeo Was Even Considering a Presidential Run?

I have never run for president, and I have also never made a formal announcement that I am not running. Everyone I know just sort of assumes that I will be doing something else with my time, which means that no such announcement is necessary. Secretary Pompeo made a different choice. On April 14, 2023 he announced that he would not be running for president.¹⁰ If Pompeo had not seriously been considering it, no such announcement would have been necessary. Indeed, Secretary Pompeo's announcement came less than 24 hours before I was going to give a scholarly presentation on his campaign at a meeting of the Southern States Communication Association. I then estimated that Pompeo had a 5% shot of capturing the nomination—a distinctly minority proposition, but a real enough possibility to keep him in the race for some time. My thinking was that a person with a brief career in Congress who later ran the CIA and spent a lot of time advancing another president's foreign policy agenda sounded a lot like George H.W. Bush, and this was a reasonable path to the presidency. I conducted my doctoral research at President Bush's library in College Station, TX, and I presently attend church across the street from the Bush family home in Midland. My employer has the Bush family home in Odessa on our campus grounds. I can't help but spend a lot of time thinking about the Bushes, and a Pompeo campaign which started from a similar basis had at least some chance of success.

There is, of course, a great deal beyond Secretary Pompeo's statement and my history studying the Bushes to suggest that Secretary Pompeo was seriously considering a presidential run. For example, on June 1, 2023 he still had an active fundraising page on WinRed, a popular conservative platform.¹¹ While that page no longer explicitly mentioned a presidential bid, it did say, "Mike Pompeo Needs Your Help" while showing Pompeo behind a podium in front of an American flag at a campaign rally. On March 3, Pompeo delivered something very much like a campaign speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC).¹² He lost a dramatic amount of weight

¹⁰ Maggie Astor, "Mike Pompeo Says he Won't Run for President in 2024," *New York Times*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/14/us/politics/mike-pompeo-president-2024.html>.

¹¹ Mike Pompeo, We Need Your Help, https://secure.winred.com/cavpac/mike-pompeo-search/?utm_campaign=20230302_H2-4J.103483_t1316490-1906&ex_tid=20230302_H2-4J.103483_t1316490-1906&gclid=CjwKCAjwg-GjBhBnEiwAMUvNW5mHOND10c7LG0Bc8VQEaHSovTnMm7zoMbwJ7x7WMSrt-TuG5KsC3aRoCjZYQAvD_BwE&exitintent=true. Accessed June 1, 2023.

¹² Meridith McGraw, "Pompeo Passes on a Presidential Run," *Politico*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/04/14/pompeo-passes-on-a-presidential-run-00092188>.

in the run-up to his announcement—by some reports he lost as much as 90 pounds.¹³ He also travelled to early primary states in a pattern similar to other presidential candidates.¹⁴ As of June 7, 2023, there is even a t-shirt available on Amazon for “Mike Pompeo 2024.”¹⁵ This was clearly a person planning to pursue the presidency. So how did he go about it?

Much, though not all, of the Pompeo campaign architecture has been removed from the web since his announcement that he is not running. While the Library of Congress has archived his previous campaign websites, those do not include a website for his presidential campaign.¹⁶ However, what is still present reflects much of what his original arguments were. For example, on the previously mentioned WinRed site Secretary Pompeo mentions 5 accomplishments and lists them as bullet points:

- Secured the border.
- Strengthened bond with Israel.
- Stood up to China.
- Rebuilt our military.
- Held Iran accountable.

Again, it is not my function here to evaluate the truth of these claims. Rather, my goal is to contrast the competing claims made by Secretary Pompeo and President Trump. The bullet points still available on WinRed are an abbreviated version of his previous websites and what is available in his speeches. Secretary Pompeo’s presidential proto-campaign focused on foreign policy, what he believes he accomplished as Secretary of State and as Director of Central Intelligence (DCI). There were, of course, attacks on the Democratic Party and other routine statements which might be expected of a Republican presidential candidate. This was nothing like a strategic silence. However, it was also nothing like a strategic noise. Pompeo was focused on arguments about why he was qualified to be president and why he would lead America well. Those arguments were explicitly centered on his time in the Trump administration and things he accomplished as Secretary or as DCI. Pompeo was not trying to distinguish himself from Trump as a matter of policy. He was trying to distinguish himself as a matter of style. One might call this approach “Trump Lite.” Trump Lite might best be understood as the attempt to capture the strengths of the former president while avoiding those matters of style which were off-putting to so many.

The problem is that the Trump Lite lane is very narrow, and Pompeo’s attempts to simultaneously tie himself to and distinguish himself from President Trump did not work very well. Trump creates *noise* by routinely say more than the situation requires or, at least, more than conventional candidates would have said. The “more” consists of both volume of statements as well as their time, place, and manner. Secretary Pompeo, in contrast, presented himself as a more conventional presidential candidate—focused on accomplishments, policy goals, and what he would do to meet those policy goals. While that might or might not have worked in a normal campaign year, the 2024 presidential campaign is not normal. Two people who have held the presidency are seeking the nominations of their parties, a situation whose closest analog is Grover Cleveland’s service as

¹³ Brooke Migdon, “Controversy Sparked by Mike Pompeo’s Claim he Lost 90 Pounds in Six Months,” *The Hill*, January 11, 2022, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/enrichment/arts-culture/589234-controversy-sparked-by-mike-pompeos-claim-he-lost-90/>.

¹⁴ Astor, “Mike Pompeo.”

¹⁵ <https://www.amazon.com/Mike-Pompeo-President-2024-campaign/dp/B085DVMSQR>. Accessed June 7, 2023.

¹⁶ Michael Richard Pompeo, Official Campaign Web Site, <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0007349/>. Accessed June 7, 2023.

both the 22nd and 24th president in the late 19th century. However, President Cleveland's media environment was rather more constrained than the environments faced by Presidents Trump and Biden.

Mr. Pompeo struggled, and ultimately failed, in his pursuit of a Trump Lite lane. David Graham, writing in *The Atlantic*, called the efforts by Pompeo and others "Trumpism without Trump."¹⁷ The challenge is that many of President Trump's supporters appear to like the entire rhetorical package he offers. Many of President Trump's opponents oppose both his style and his substance. That means there is very little space for an attempt such as the halting presidential run of Mike Pompeo.

We must approach any predictions about the 2024 election with humility. As I discussed earlier in this essay, I had been studying the Pompeo proto-campaign because I assumed he had a reasonable, if narrow, lane for success. I could then imagine—and still can—a world where President Trump decides not to or is unable to seek the presidency, and I thought for a while there might be a larger opportunity for a person running in the Trump Lite lane. I was even preparing to give a scholarly presentation about the Pompeo campaign when his "I am not running" announcement came less than 24 hours before. I was spectacularly wrong in my assumption that Secretary Pompeo had a reasonable opportunity for success. That begs the question of who exactly does have a reasonable opportunity to gain the 2024 Republican presidential nomination.

What Might This Mean for the 2024 Republican Primary Field?

I would like to return to the article from Graham, who also mentioned Ambassador Nikki Haley and Governor Ron DeSantis. The *Washington Post* wrote that, "Trumpism is a dish Republicans can serve without Trump,"¹⁸ and the website 538 noted that, "Republicans are "thinking about Trumpism without Trump."¹⁹ Here's the problem with those arguments—the former president is still very much engaged in the political arena and is actively seeking the Republican presidential nomination. It is hard to separate any rhetorical movement from the person for whom it was named when that person is still actively engaged in the movement. Exhibit A for my claim is the Pompeo campaign. While certainly not definitive for all candidates, it is an exemplar that those who seek to run with Trump's strengths but without his weaknesses will struggle.

The 2024 primaries are likely to play out differently for someone like Ambassador Haley than they are for Governor DeSantis. While both have been closely identified with the policy preferences and, sometimes, the rhetorical styles of President Trump they face very different challenges. Ambassador Haley served in the Trump administration, which means she will almost necessarily have to explain her accomplishments serving the man she is running against. While she might well do this with more skill than did Secretary Pompeo, she at least starts with the same fundamental challenge he had. The same is true of Vice President Mike Pence. While Vice President Pence has sometimes attempted to distinguish himself from President Trump—particularly concerning the

¹⁷ David A. Graham, "Trumpism Without Trump: The 2024 Race is Showing That the -ism Will Outlast the Man," *The Atlantic*, February 7, 2023. Accessed June 7, 2023 from <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/02/donald-trump-trumpism-gop-candidate-2024-election/672966/>.

¹⁸ Timothy L. O'Brien, "Trumpism is a Dish Republicans Can Serve Without Trump," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2022. Accessed June 7, 2023 from https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/trumpism-is-a-dish-republicans-can-serve-without-trump/2022/11/09/df163d60-6059-11ed-a131-e900e4a6336b_story.html.

¹⁹ Julia Azari, "How Republicans are Thinking About Trumpism Without Trump," *FiveThirtyEight*, March 15, 2022. Accessed June 7, 2023 from <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-republicans-are-thinking-about-trumpism-without-trump/>.

events of January 6, 2021—his highest role in government is fundamentally tied to service with President Trump. I do not see either other these officials, nor any other key figure in the Trump administration, successfully challenging the former president for the 2024 Republican nomination. The only real caveat to that would be if President Trump removed himself from consideration or was removed due to medical, legal, or other concerns. However, that is very much not the situation as of Summer 2023. While he is presently under indictment in multiple jurisdictions, those indictments have not yet changed his campaign tactics nor his ability to seek the presidency. As long as Trump is running, I believe he will defeat any former official from his own administration. Someone like Governor DeSantis may have a different opportunity, because even if he imitates some of the style or policy of President Trump, he does so without actually being a Trump official.

I believe that leaves three reasonable possibilities, and I shall discuss them here in what I see as descending order of probability. First, I think the most likely possibility is that Former President Trump captures the Republican presidential nomination for the third consecutive election. There is a great deal of talk about Trumpism without Trump, or a search for Trump Lite. However, Trump is still very much an active part of the political scene, and those who were most enthusiastic about his last two candidacies are particularly likely to vote in the 2024 Republican primaries. He might be defeated by a candidate with a better argument, and he might be defeated by age or criminal investigations, but I believe that Trumpism will center on Trump himself so long as the former president remains an active candidate. In particular, that means it will be difficult for one of his own former officials (Pompeo, Haley, Pence, etc) to replace him. For one of those officials to become a viable candidate, President Trump would have to be removed from the race (which is possible) and have his votes seek an alternative as close to him as possible.

Of course, the primary season is long and there are other possibilities. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis trails President Trump badly in early polls, although he also polls well ahead of every other Republican candidate.²⁰ While his support softened later in 2023, as of October Governor DeSantis is still ahead of any other Republican rival not named Trump in most polling. DeSantis is also not constrained by prior service in the Trump administration. If President Trump remains in the race and Republican primary voters decide they want an alternative to the former president, and if they further decide that they want someone who shares some similarities with Trump, I believe it is most likely to be Governor DeSantis.

Although it is unlikely, there is a third possibility. The Republican Party may decide to go in an altogether different direction. That is hard to see as of this writing, because the focus of Republican politics is on the former president. However, Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina is echoing President Ronald Reagan by saying things such as, “American is the city on the hill. I’m living proof that God and a good family and the United States of America can do all things if we believe.”²¹ Although Senator Scott’s actual policy positions are quite conservative, his tone is markedly different from those seeking the rhetorical space occupied by Donald Trump. If the Republican Party suddenly changes course and moves away from President Trump’s style, Senator Scott or some other candidate such as former Governor Christie of New Jersey may fit the bill. As of October 2023 Republicans have not coalesced around such a candidate, although it remains possible.

²⁰ Ron Elving, “Trailing Trump, DeSantis Still Bears Burdens That Have Brought Down Past Front-Runners,” *NPR*, May 27, 2023. Accessed June 7, 2023 from <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/27/1178394117/trailing-trump-desantis-still-bears-burdens-that-have-brought-down-past-frontrun>.

²¹ Cal Thomas, “Tim Scott: The New Reagan,” *The Express*, May 30, 2023. Accessed June 7, 2023 from <https://www.lockhaven.com/opinion/columns/2023/05/tim-scott-the-new-reagan/>.

Conclusion

In closing, however, I want to return to the core argument I proposed at the start of this essay. It is very difficult to capture President Trump's strengths without also adopting his weaknesses. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo attempted to do so, and I believe that is why his campaign failed. I judge it likely that the campaigns of other former Trump officials will meet the same fate unless Trump is no longer in the race. For a party drawn to Trumpism, the most likely candidate is the former president himself. If the party decides it wants Trumpism without Trump it is unlikely to be a former administration official, which leaves Governor DeSantis as the least unlikely possibility. If they want something altogether different, at least stylistically, then the candidacy of someone like Senator Scott is a possibility. However, Trump's use of noise as rhetorical strategy is unusual in contemporary politics. It will be difficult for another candidate to become Trump without adopting that same noise, and if Republican primary voters decide to embrace that style they are much more likely to seek the original than one of his copies.