

Letters to a Trump Voter –

III Do You Think Tribal Hatred is a Bug or a Feature?

9 October 2020

Dear Dad,

The President's many, many attempts to drum-up racial, national, religious, and political hatred is one of the most enduring themes of his political life. When people try to dismiss or defend this record, one has to wonder if they are really excusing this behavior as a price to pay for the benefits of a Trump presidency, or because they actually agree with the tribal hatreds he stokes. As a computer programmer would put it, is it a bug or a feature?

Here I will explain why many consider Donald Trump a master of hate speech, and I will circle back to his followers at the end of the piece.

A. Right Out of the Gate

Because Trump fans often accuse the media of quoting out of context, here is a long quote from Trump's campaign announcement speech.

"The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems.

"Thank you. It's true, and these are the best and the finest. When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.

"But I speak to border guards and they tell us what we're getting. And it only makes common sense. It only makes common sense. They're sending us not the right people.¹

The message is very clear: "they're not sending you." Wait, you mean those people are not me? Those Hispanic immigrants standing all day chopping chicken carcasses into pieces so we have something to eat, until they get COVID and get sent home without pay? It's true, they're not me. They're your father Max Klinger in 1913 and all the other immigrants who worked day and night for crappy pay so their kids wouldn't have to.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/> and many other sources. I think he meant to say "these are not the best and the finest". Or maybe he was saying it ironically.

Trump was not referring to all Mexicans, just the ones that come here. And probably he specifically meant people coming here illegally, since he later refers to border guards. And he did say some may be “good people.” Maybe this is just his way of saying there is a small group of dangerous people among immigrants who we must protect ourselves against.

Yes. He was merely exaggerating about a group of people to emphasize the worst people in the group in order to portray the entire group as evil and threatening. And to increase his own political power. Can you think of any other politicians who have done that? Do you admire them?

Some have accused the media of ignoring nuance in reporting on Trump by mischaracterizing his statements as being more broad than they really were. But take a look at that speech. It wasn't a conversation with someone who caught him on the way to the golf course, it was his *announcement speech*. If you look carefully at the entire speech, you can deduce that he is calling illegal immigrants criminals, but anyone listening casually will understand that the point is: “Mexico is sending over rapists and drug dealers.”

Do you think it is more likely that poor Donald Trump just unfortunately keeps generating sound bites that make him look like a racist xenophobe, or that he crafts sound bites to attract racist xenophobes to his campaign?

Trump has tried to justify his Mexicans-are-rapists quote by pointing to a report that the majority of women sneaking into America from Central America “are raped along the way.”² This is the kind of fuzzy reasoning I encounter all the time when I talk to people about politics. Trump says something about rape and illegal immigrants. The article also says something about rape and illegal immigrants. Therefore, QED, Trump wasn't making up his claims and it's unfair to attack him for them. But the politician and the article are not saying the same thing. The article is saying that the price women pay for getting from Central America to the US is forced sex by people who have power over them as they cross over two borders and through Mexico. The politician is twisting that into a statement that the people immigrating to America are rapists.

Trump has often pointed to illegal immigrants as a source of crime:

² <https://www.mediaite.com/online/trump-completely-misread-fusion-article-about-immigration-and-rape/> reports on interviews with Trump and links to the original article about the migrant women.

"So here are just a few statistics on the human toll of illegal immigration. According to a 2011 government report, the arrests attached to the criminal alien population included an estimated 25,000 people for homicide, 42,000 for robbery, nearly 70,000 for sex offenses, and nearly 15,000 for kidnapping."³

Those sound like big numbers, until you realize that there are about 24 million non-citizens in the US, 11 million here without authorization.⁴ "Criminal alien population" refers to any non-citizen convicted of a criminal offense (whether authorized to be in the US or not), so the figures refer to about 1 out of 1000 non-citizens in jail or prison for homicide. For the population as a whole, maybe .7 out of 1000 are imprisoned for homicide.⁵ Thus the incarceration rate for homicide is not very different between immigrants and non-immigrants. Some studies point to lower crime rates for immigrants (see source for note 3). Many, if not most, of the victims of crimes by non-citizens are other non-citizens, not the citizens Trump claims to be protecting.

The exact crime rate is not that important. No matter how you slice it, only a miniscule fraction of immigrants commit violent crimes. It makes about as much sense to point to Bernie Madoff as proof that Jews are out to steal "real Americans" money and don't belong in the US.

Given the opportunity to comment on crime against immigrants, Trump is somewhat ambivalent. When asked about two men who beat a man with a pole and then told the police "Donald Trump was right, all these illegals need to be deported," Trump couldn't resist putting in a good word for the alleged attackers:

"I haven't heard about that. It would be a shame, but I haven't heard about that. I will say that people who are following me are very passionate. They love this country and they want this country to be great again."⁶

B. Actual Nazis

David Duke is a neo-Nazi and KKK leader whom Trump had no problem identifying, in 2000, as a big liability for the Reform Party because Duke was "a bigot, a racist, a problem."

³ <https://www.factcheck.org/2018/06/is-illegal-immigration-linked-to-more-or-less-crime/>.

⁴ Congressional Research Service report at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41592.pdf>.

⁵ I could not find the totals for the population as a whole, but based on state prison system and a small increase based on extrapolating to jails and federal prisons, it is about 220,000 in 2018, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2018.html>.

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/08/21/trump-says-fans-are-very-passionate-after-hearing-one-of-them-allegedly-assaulted-hispanic-man/>.

Rejecting such an endorsement from David Duke is one of the easiest calls in American politics. That's why this exchange between CNN's Jake Tapper and Donald Trump in February 2016 is so surreal:⁷

TAPPER: *But I guess the question from the Anti-Defamation League is, even if you don't know about their endorsement, there are these groups and individuals [“former KKK grand wizard David Duke” mentioned a few seconds earlier in interview] endorsing you. Would you just say unequivocally you condemn them and you don't want their support?*

TRUMP: Well, I have to look at the group. I mean, I don't know what group you're talking about.

You wouldn't want me to condemn a group that I know nothing about. I would have to look. If you would send me a list of the groups, I will do research on them. And, certainly, I would disavow if I thought there was something wrong.

TAPPER: *The Ku Klux Klan?*

TRUMP: But you may have groups in there that are totally fine, and it would be very unfair. So, give me a list of the groups, and I will let you know.

TAPPER: *OK. I mean, I'm just talking about David Duke and the Ku Klux Klan here, but...*

TRUMP: I don't know any -- honestly, I don't know David Duke. I don't believe I have ever met him. I'm pretty sure I didn't meet him. And I just don't know anything about him.

Donald Trump, eager to slander anyone and willing to make ignorant pronouncements on anything from crime to climate to coronavirus, suddenly needs to do more research before he can denounce the KKK.

Ever since, this has been an issue that many journalists and politicians have raised with Trump. And since then, he has denounced white supremacy 20 times by one count.⁸ In some cases, his denunciations have sounded petulant and angry – “I denounced! Okay??” – and in others, they sound more sincere. Yet Trump still manages to rekindle the issue, always blaming the media for controversies that he starts.

The most notorious time was after a coalition of far-right and racist groups organized a “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, VA (August 2017) to protest removal of statues of leaders of a failed nineteenth century pro-slavery rebellion. The night before the official rally, neo-Nazis marched through the University of Virginia's campus shouting slogans such as “Jews will not replace us.” On Saturday, physical fights broke out between Unite the Right ralliers and anti-racist counterprotesters. Then a Nazi

⁷ Transcript from <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1602/28/sotu.01.html>, video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuMUNGV6mBA>.

⁸ <https://thepostmillennial.com/over-20-times-trump-publicly-denounced-white-supremacy>.

sympathizer deliberately drove his car into a group of the counterprotesters, killing one woman, Heather Heyer, and injuring others.⁹

Shortly afterwards, Trump denounced white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and the murderous driver, but also infamously said there were “very fine people on both sides.” When asked to clarify, he said “Not all of those people were white supremacists by any stretch. Those people were also there because they wanted to protest the taking down of a statue of Robert E. Lee.... if you take a look, the night before they were there to protest the taking down of the statue of Robert E. Lee.”¹⁰

One problem with Trump’s statement was that “the night before” there was only the neo-Nazi protest, and any “very fine people” attending the Saturday rally should have known that they were joining forces with avowed racists. Another problem is that the Robert E. Lee statue is itself inextricably connected to an ideology of white supremacy.

To this day, Trump still stumbles over the question. In the presidential debate with Joe Biden, Trump took a simple question asking him to distance himself from white supremacists, and made it an opportunity to make a call to arms instead:

“The Proud Boys? Stand back and stand by, but I’ll tell you what, I’ll tell you what, somebody’s got to do something about Antifa and the Left.”¹¹

C. “I’m the least racist person that you’ve ever encountered”

I should include an entire section on Trump’s bigoted attacks on Muslims, but the volume of information about Trump bigotry is too great for the time I have to write this. Just as he portrays a wave of illegal Latin American immigrants raping and murdering their way through the United States, he takes every opportunity to portray radicalism and violence as typical characteristics of Muslims. Both Barack Obama and George Bush went out of their way to clarify to the American people and to the world that they did not believe stereotypes of Muslims.

All Americans must recognize that the face of terror is not the true faith -- face of Islam. Islam is a faith that brings comfort to a billion people around the world. It's a

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unite_the_Right_rally#Vehicular_attack_and_homicide.

¹⁰ <https://www.politifact.com/article/2019/apr/26/context-trumps-very-fine-people-both-sides-remarks/>.

¹¹ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/trump-condemn-white-supremacists/>. The Proud Boys is an extremist and often violent group that declares itself to be anti-racist but is widely viewed as allied with white supremacists. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proud_Boys.

faith that has made brothers and sisters of every race. It's a faith based upon love, not hate. –George W. Bush¹²

Rather than denouncing these stereotypes like Bush did, Trump went out of his way to promote them.

Trump's ethnic hostility is not limited to Mexicans and Muslims. There are many compilations of some of the more blatant bigoted statements and actions of Donald Trump about various people of color. Here are a few:¹³

1. **No apartments for blacks.** Signed an agreement (1975) with federal government not to discriminate after Trump employees were shown to repeatedly tell blacks no apartments were available and then offer apartments in the same buildings to whites.
2. **Hide the black employees.** When Trump visited his casino, managers were said to remove black employees so he wouldn't see them (1980s). Trump himself said he didn't want "Black guys [accountants] counting my money". Trump Plaza Hotel paid \$200,000 fine for moving black and female dealers from tables at request of a customer.
3. **Portray Obama as foreign.** Spread false rumors (2011-2015) that Barack Obama was not born in the US.
4. **Judge a judge for his ethnicity.** Said a US judge should recuse himself from a Trump University lawsuit because of his Mexican heritage and membership in a Latino lawyers association.
5. **Exaggerate crime committed by blacks.** Tweeted (2015) false statistics grossly exaggerating number of whites murdered by blacks in the US.
6. **Stereotype Africans.** Denied saying Nigerians in the US would never "go back to their huts" (2017) or talking about "shithole countries" in Africa (2018). As discussed in Letter II, Trump's negligible credibility undercuts such denials.
7. **Portray non-white Congress members as foreign.** Tweeted that representatives Cortez (born in NY), Pressley (born in Ohio), Tlaib (born in Michigan), and Omar (immigrated from Somalia in 1995 at age of 12) should "go back" to the countries they are from (2019).
8. **Ethnic slurs.** Repeatedly uses ethnic jokes like "Pocohontas" for Elizabeth Warren and "Kung Flu" for the coronavirus.

Like his record with white supremacists, Trump's record on race is not all bad. In the 1990s, he donated office space to Jesse Jackson's civil rights group, and he fought local

¹² <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/ramadan/islam.html>.

¹³ <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/25/12270880/donald-trump-racist-racism-history>,
<https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2015/nov/23/donald-trump/trump-tweet-blacks-white-homicide-victims/>
on black crime.

resistance to turning Mar a Lago into a club by pointing out that other clubs in Palm Beach banned Jews and blacks.¹⁴

So, other than portraying Mexicans as rapists and Muslim as terrorists, other than portraying US politicians of color as un-American, other than his ethnic slurs, racist business practices, and negative stereotypes, other than having trouble distancing himself from white supremacists, Donald Trump is not bigoted at all.

For both the lying and the bigotry, I've heard many people say that the very fact that he says openly untrue or bigoted things is a kind of refreshing honesty that differentiates him from slimey politicians who try to hide their dishonesty and racism. But this is not a good thing. I prefer a politician who is afraid of appearing racist. A politician that does not try to avoid making statements that are easily interpreted in a racist way is one who finds bigotry untroubling or useful.

Just as noticing Trump's habitual level of dishonesty should make you skeptical of everything he says, the many examples of fairly naked bigotry should guide how you interpret other statements and actions that are less obviously racist.

Trump claims that immigration policies are only concerned with upholding the law. The president says that only the illegal immigration is bad, and he wants more legal immigration. Meanwhile, its hard to know if the illegal population has gone up, down, or sideways, but the Trump administration has found several ways to cut legal immigration.¹⁵

Maybe if Norwegians were crossing over the border to ask for asylum instead of Guatemalans, Trump would be equally willing to take their children away from them. Maybe... but I doubt it.

D. That's Just Trump Being Trump

Sometimes Trump's defenders point to some bad treatment that Trump levels at a white male to point out that Trump's insults, lies, and verbal attacks against minorities are not special treatment but merely a subset of attacks he makes on anyone who gets in his way.

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/01/16/business/jesse-jackson-sets-up-office-to-monitor-corporate-action.html>, https://splinternews.com/donald-trump-keeps-saying-that-his-mar-a-lago-club-is-p-1793862259?fbclid=IwAR3E2-QTyPOnZRGgnBKTiHjJiC7YuoqavY_foDFI7rwr64VESoTPNER-zOc.

¹⁵ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/02/06/immigration-trump-says-he-wants-more-legal-migrants-u-s/2792732002/>, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2020/07/21/trump-cuts-legal-immigrants-by-half-and-hes-not-done-yet/#13b2fbe26168>.

There is some truth to this argument, but all the worse for Trump. Inciting ethnic hatred is just one especially effective way to increase hate in general. Trump is happy to take any division between people and make it wider and nastier. He believes that inciting hatred is a winning strategy and voters like you, Dad, have proved him right.

He has encouraged crowds at his rallies to chant “Lock Her Up,” first about Hillary Clinton, then about Ilhan Omar.¹⁶ When the crowd started chanting to lock up Clinton after the 2016 election, Trump told them it was time to retire the chant. He admitted that he was only pushing the idea of prosecuting her as a weapon in the political campaign.

His attacks on “the deep state” aim at professionals like my wife and neighbors whose jobs are to implement policy based – as much as possible – on objective criteria. It’s exactly this pool of expertise Trump wants to discredit, because it stands in the way of his desire to exercise arbitrary power. Similarly, the conspiracy theories he promotes about the security of the vote is laying the groundwork for disputing any election results he does not like. In the world that Trump is trying to create, you don’t trust any institutions that have a stake in actually telling the truth, only Donald Trump. And (as Mom put it) Sean Hannity.

Trump regularly demonizes the press. In February 2017, irritated that they had contradicted his blatant lies regarding inauguration size, Trump tweeted

“The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @CNN, @NBCNews and many more) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American people. SICK!”¹⁷

He especially liked focussing vitriol at the press during campaign rallies, where he would point to the press box and encourage thousands of people to vent their hatred at the reporters covering the rally. During a political campaign, Representative Greg Gianforte (R-MT) body slammed a reporter whose questioning Gianforte didn’t like. Gianforte pled guilty to assault but won the election anyway. Trump joked about the incident at a

¹⁶Well, they’re both women and Omar is black, so maybe these aren’t perfect examples.

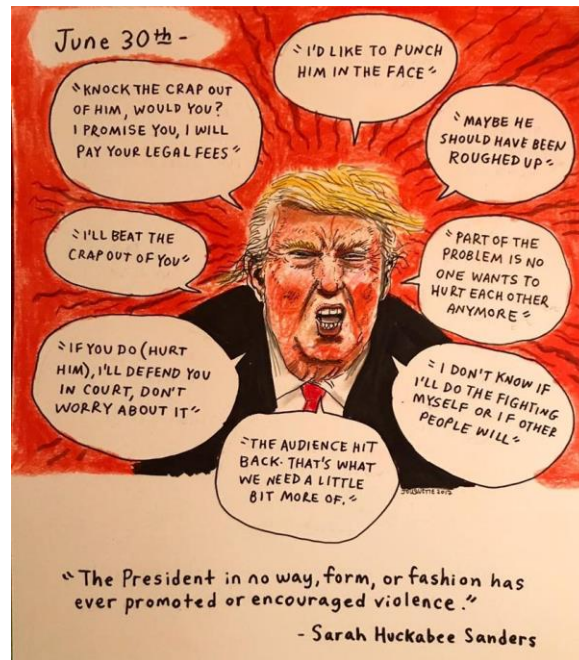
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-clinton-lock-her-up_n_584b5b53e4b04c8e2bb01274,

<https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/519069-trump-crowd-chants-lock-her-up-about-omar-as-president-warns-of-refugees-in>.

¹⁷ <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/9/17/21443658/trump-coronavirus-covid-19-deaths-blue-states>.
<https://thehill.com/homenews/media/413090-hundreds-of-journalists-sign-letter-condemning-trumps-attacks-on-the-press>.

rally, saying “Any guy that can do a body slam... he’s my guy,” and boasted about endorsing Gianforte.¹⁸

That’s just one example of cheerleading for violence. The figure, a cartoon by Jesse Duquette, shows a selection of Trump quotes from rallies. It was rated “true” by Snopes.¹⁹



E. Which Side Are You On?

Though the US became fixated on jihadi terrorism after 9/11, for obvious reasons, in most years the largest group of incidents and of deaths in the United States are due to right wing groups rather than left-wing or religion-inspired groups. Leaked copies of a draft Department of Homeland Security report this year point to white supremacist groups as the deadliest, killing 39 people (out of a total of 48 killed by violent extremists) in 2019, the worst year for killings by domestic violent extremists since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995.²⁰

¹⁸ <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/412170-trump-i-knew-body-slamming-a-reporter-would-help-gianforte>.

¹⁹ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/donald-trump-incitement-violence/>.

²⁰ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states>,
<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/04/white-supremacists-terror-threat-dhs-409236>.

These groups may or may not be growing because by Donald Trump. Either way, even if you personally feel you can dismiss Trump's rants against different groups as mere rhetoric, there are others ready to take them to a deadly conclusion.²¹

In my opinion, the greater danger comes from the much larger group that is not picking up weapons but supports policies based on hatred and fear.

There's been a running debate over just what aspect of Trump's message appeals to the people who caused his improbable election. Researchers asked a group of people their views on housing policy after showing them a picture of either a black man or a white man. Among supporters of Hillary Clinton, the average level of support for government housing assistance was about the same whether they were shown either picture. Among supporters of Trump, people who were shown the black man expressed much less support for assistance and more hostility to the recipients of assistance. Just seeing a picture of a black guy triggered the Trump supporters.

Another study compared white people's [self-reported] votes with their answers to various political and economic questions. The voters who expressed the least economic satisfaction were a little more likely to vote for Trump. But people who gave answers that were the most sexist or had the least acknowledgement of racism in society were almost twice as likely to vote for Trump.²²

Whatever your reasons for supporting Donald Trump, your vote for him is an endorsement of boosting tribal resentment as a political tool and as a guide to policy. I'm amazed that "is he signalling encouragement to neo-Nazis?" is a question that could be asked of any US president in the 21st century. Don't blame the media for it, blame Donald Trump's own behavior. And though I know you don't sympathize with neo-Nazis at all, don't blame me for wondering how much your support for Trump is strengthened by approval of his bigotry.

Love,
B a K

²¹ <https://theintercept.com/2018/10/27/here-is-a-list-of-far-right-attackers-trump-inspired-cesar-sayoc-wasnt-the-first-and-wont-be-the-last/>.

²² Both these studies are discussed in the Vox article cited in footnote 13.