

Letters to a Trump Voter - II

3 October 2020

Dear Dad,

Since you always taught me that it was important to be honest, I continue to be surprised by how little Donald Trump's contempt for truth seems to bother you.

A. The Dishonesty Test Case

"from the platform where the President was sworn in... to the Washington Monument. All of this space was full when the President took the Oath of Office... This was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration - period - both in person and around the globe." – Presidential Spokesperson Sean Spicer.¹

I keep coming back to this incident not because the size of Trump's inauguration crowd is an important issue, but because of what it says about Trump. When Trump heard reports that the crowd at his inauguration was smaller than at President Obama's, he was outraged. As my "Greatest Hits" post shows, photos taken from the Washington Monument clearly illustrated the difference in crowd size, and are corroborated by many other photos taken throughout the Mall as well as Metro ridership figures and other evidence. Nonetheless, Trump sent his spokesman to make the indignant pronouncement to the press that included the quote above.

Many issues in politics are complicated, or subjective, or difficult to prove. This one is not. It shows that the President is willing to reverse the truth even about a large event taking place at midday in the center of the nation's capital in front of thousands of people and dozens of journalists. It shows that he will push any level of untruth, no matter how obvious.

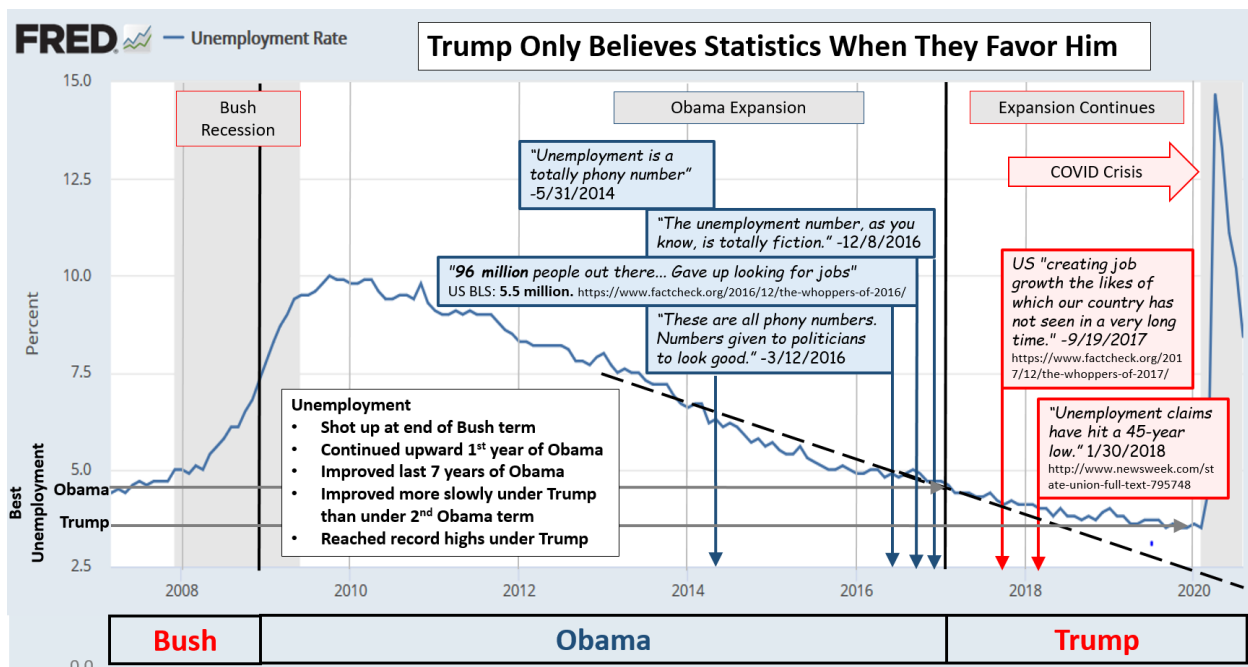
At least one person I talked to at the time told me that he had proof that CNN disseminated false news: the fact that CNN reported a smaller turnout at Trump's inauguration. Trump partisans have tried to argue that the media distorted the count by, for instance, releasing a photo that was taken early at the Trump rally before the crowd reached peak size. They sometimes argue their case with photos taken near the

¹ Except where noted, all quotes are documented in my blog post [Trump's Greatest Hits \(Against the Truth\)](#), which contains a chart listing a few of his most notable falsehoods. The post includes a file containing detailed information and references.

stage, which show a large crowd. It was a large crowd – certainly over 100,000 people – just not as big as Obama’s. A picture from a low angle and from the front of such a crowd is not good for judging how far back the crowd stretches.

Just one photo taken from the Washington Monument end of the Mall, showing a crowd extending as far as Obama’s, would prove Trump’s claim. There isn’t one. I’ve looked several times since January 2017.

B. Phony Numbers



Inauguration size is not a significant policy issue, but the economy is. As the chart above shows, Trump alternately dismissed government unemployment figures as “totally phony” or “totally fiction”, and quoted incorrect numbers exaggerating unemployment by large factors. Within about a year of his inauguration, he was touting figures from the same source. The terrible 4.9% unemployment of October 2016 (down from 10% in 2009) had become the wonderful 4.1% unemployment of October 2017.

This kind of rhetoric is less unusual than the Inauguration incident, but Trump still takes it to the extreme. It’s not every politician who will describe seven years of basically uninterrupted economic growth as an economic disaster, while describing further marginal improvement as the dawn of a new era. Moreover it is the very rare politician who will simply dismiss statistics he doesn’t like as lies, only to use those same statistics a short time later.

C. Reversing What Trump and Obama Did

Veterans Choice law was "the greatest idea I think I ever had" "if they have to wait on line for 12 days... Or much longer... They go immediately to see a doctor privately. We pay for their bill." -Donald Trump

"those are the bad laws that the Democrats gave us. We have to break up families." - Donald Trump

The degree to which Trump is willing to take credit or refuse blame puts him in a class by himself. In August 2014, President Obama signed the Veteran's Access, Choice, and Accountability Act, which allowed veterans to get healthcare outside the Veteran's Administration (VA) system in order to avoid very long waits or long travel. Trump later signed the bipartisan VA Mission Act which consolidated Veterans Choice with other VA programs. Another politician might blur the distinction between the two in order to take credit, but Trump not only explicitly claims the law that was signed by Obama, but he even adds details to make sure his audience thinks it was Trump's idea!

A central theme of Donald Trump's campaign and presidency has been reducing immigration. His most infamous application of this theme has been the breakup of families, with children literally taken from their mother or father's arms. In true Doublespeak fashion, Trump has described this as

- a good policy which will deter migrants – "If they feel there will be a separation, they don't come" – and
- a bad policy forced on him by the Obama administration.

It is true that before Trump, children were taken from an adult if the Boarder Patrol suspected that the adult was abusing the child and/or not the child's actual parent. However, it was only under Trump that all migrant children were separated from their parents. The number of such separations skyrocketed right after the Trump administration announced the policy change, and dropped again after Trump signed an executive order to reverse the policy, though apparently separations have continued at a slower rate after that.² About 3000 children were taken from their parents over a short period in 2018.

² <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/trump-s-family-separation-policy-never-really-ended-why-ncna1025376>.

D. “Have You No Sense of Decency, sir...?”³

Perhaps the most dramatic aspect of Trump’s dishonesty is his willingness to slander others, especially in the name of his other campaign theme, Muslim terrorists. Congress member Ilhan Omar (D – MN), a Muslim woman who came to the US from Africa, is a perfect target for Trump’s xenophobic agenda. Something Omar actually said about al-Shabab, the Somali affiliate of al Qaeda, was that the group’s

“whole ideology is based on terrorizing the communities that they would like to have an influence in... I do not share that ideology. So for someone to require an explanation from me as to why they’re committing these heinous acts, to me it is inconceivable.” -Ilhan Omari

What Trump said she said was an invented quote about feeling pride in al Qaeda. Even more shocking are his insinuations about President Obama after a lone gunman massacred dozens at an Orlando nightclub in the name of the self-declared Islamic Caliphate. Obama has specifically spoken against “an extremist ideology that has spread within some Muslim communities” and “a perverted interpretation of Islam that calls for war against America.” Obama also launched a war against the so-called Islamic State⁴ and ordered hundreds of drone strikes against al Qaeda⁵. Trump wanted his followers to forget all that when he said,

“Look, we’re led by a man that either is not tough, not smart, or he’s got something else in mind. And the something else in mind — you know, people can’t believe it. People cannot, they cannot believe that President Obama is acting the way he acts and can’t even mention the words ‘radical Islamic terrorism.’ There’s something going on. It’s inconceivable. There’s something going on.” -Donald Trump

This quote was universally interpreted as calling Obama an ally of Islamic terrorists, which Trump essentially confirmed with a tweet that said “Media fell all over themselves criticizing what Donald Trump ‘may have insinuated about @POTUS.’ But he’s right”.

Does the current president of the United States believe that the previous one was colluding with or sympathetic to terrorist organizations attacking the United States? If

³ Joseph Welch replying to Senator Joseph McCarthy in the course of discrediting McCarthy’s unsubstantiated claims of communist infiltration in the US Army. This hearing is widely considered to be the end of any moral authority McCarthy had as an anti-communist. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/joseph-mccarthy-meets-his-match>.

⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American-led_intervention_in_Iraq_\(2014%E2%80%93present\)#Obama's_decision_for_airstrikes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American-led_intervention_in_Iraq_(2014%E2%80%93present)#Obama's_decision_for_airstrikes).

⁵ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/obama-drone-strikes/>.

so, where are the investigations, reports, consequences? If not, what price does someone pay for making absurd accusations of serious crime?

In Trump's case, no price. His amoral lies were rewarded with growing support.

E. But Don't They All Do It?

Not only do all politicians lie, but all people lie. However, it is not too hard to understand that some people habitually lie, whereas others make an effort to tell the truth.

While all politicians lie, Trump's blatant disregard for truth, willingness to state things that are plainly seen to be untrue, and outlandish accusations against opponents takes him to places that few major politicians are willing to go. I've pointed out a handful of these falsehoods here, and 23 of the major ones in my earlier post.

Let's compare to some other politicians. President Obama was widely and justly excoriated for a single line he often repeated while campaigning for the Affordable Care Act (ACA, or "Obamacare"): "If you like your health plan, you can keep your health plan." This was not true. Obama should have known (or did know) better. When the ACA went into effect, plans covering 2-5 million people did not meet standards imposed by the ACA and could no longer be offered.⁶

I don't want to defend Obama's falsehood, but just how false was it? There were about 300 million people in America, so it's not true that all of them could keep their insurance, only 98-99% could. In many cases, insurance companies that dropped a plan that the ACA said was substandard replaced it with a better one, and low-income people were also given government subsidies to pay for the new higher-coverage plans. If Obama had tried to be more accurate, he could have said, "If you like your health insurance, you can keep your health insurance, except for a few percent of people with weak coverage who may be forced to get more complete coverage which in many cases the ACA will subsidize."

So Obama's most famous falsehood was wrong, but it was about a detail (though an important one) concerning a very complicated policy question. It is not even remotely in the same league as speculating over whether a US President was a terrorist sympathizer or promising that new border walls would stop drug smugglers and human traffickers or claiming that Democrats received millions of illegal votes.

⁶ This and other information about the ACA is from <https://www.factcheck.org/2014/04/millions-lost-insurance/>.

Dubious Statements, September 2020 ABC Town Halls

Fact Check	Candidate Statement	
Joe Biden		
https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/joe-biden-town-hall-fact-checking-democratic-nominees/story?id=73062846		
US A.G. Bill Barr said masks worst imposition other than slavery	Masks: Bill Barr said "That it's like slavery"	1
former Obama CDC director said masks might have saved 100k lives	Trump CDC director said masks might save 100k lives	4
Trump condemned white supremacists but undercut his own statements	"has yet to condemn... The far-right and the white supremacists"	
Biden could be 1st president since Reagan w/o Ivy League degree	Biden could be 1st without Ivy League degree	
https://pjmedia.com/news-and-politics/matt-margolis/2020/09/18/fact-check-here-are-bidens-biggest-lies-from-his-cnn-town-hall-n942822		
Biden 1st in college from immediate family, but other relatives went before	"guys like me, with the first in my family to go to college"	
Trump mentioned virus at State of the Union, but did not warn of danger	"Imagine if he had said something" about COVID	
Biden called for fracking followed by eventual restrictions	wants "continuation of fracking safely and with proper guidelines"	
"coronavirus will get worse before it gets better" (1/27/20, USA Today)	"in January, I wrote an article...saying we've got a real problem."	
Biden called for masks in early Apr - I'm not sure about March	"back in March, I was calling for the need for us to have masks"	
I don't know how many people in that neighborhood own stock	"my neighborhood in Scranton, not a whole lot of people own stock."	
Donald Trump		
https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trumps-abc-news-town-hall-fact-checking-presidents/story?id=73030890		
Trump working to remove protections for pre-existing+B17:B28 conditions	Trump will "protect people with preexisting conditions"	6
US cases/capita high w/o more testing per capita than others	US has more COVID cases because "we do much more testing"	
almost no African American support, little progress	"tremendous" Black support and progress w/ Trump	
experts all agree that masks are important	"a lot of people think the masks are not good"	
US economy has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels	Americans "doing better than... before the pandemic"	
probably months to a year to distribute vaccine	"could be three weeks, four weeks"	
US among worst rich countries for excess mortality due to COVID	"very good marks... Compared to other countries"	6
several measures indicate high number of US COVID cases	US more COVID cases because "we do much more testing"	
Scott (R - SC) police reform plan defeated in Senate	Scott police reform plan "that everybody pretty much agreed to"	
w/o vaccine, COVID could kill > 1M more before US gets herd immunity	COVID-19 "would go away without the vaccine"	
Biden plan raises+B26 taxes on incomes over \$400,000	Bidens "wants to raise everybody's taxes"	
US policy is slowing admission of refugees and legal immigrants	citizenship: "We want people to come into our country... but we want them to come in through a legal system"	
incorrect	essentially correct	
partly correct or misleading	not sure if essentially correct or not	

What about Joe Biden? To make a manageable comparison, I just looked at two recent televised "townhalls," both in the same format and both sponsored by ABC News, which also fact-checked them. To answer criticisms that the mainstream media is biased against Trump, I also included a fact-check on Biden's townhall from a conservative source, PJ Media.

In my opinion, many of the "lies" that PJ Media says Biden told were actually true. For instance, Biden attacks Trump for not preparing the country to deal with COVID-19, saying "imagine if he had said something" at the State of the Union address in January 2020. PJ Media points out that Trump did in fact say something:

"Protecting Americans' health also means fighting infectious diseases. We are coordinating with the Chinese government and working closely together on the Coronavirus outbreak in China. My Administration will take all necessary steps to safeguard our citizens from this threat."⁷

⁷ Full address text at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/04/politics/trump-2020-state-of-the-union-address/index.html>.

Trump did literally say something, but he didn't say the kind of thing Biden was talking about. He didn't prepare Americans for the possibility they might have to change their behavior to combat the disease.

My judgement from the factchecks (see chart) is that Biden made one genuinely false (and unfair) statement and four partially false or misleading statements, and that Trump made 6 false statements and 6 misleading/partially-false ones. This is consistent with the general pattern – other politicians make misleading or partially incorrect statements (in the case of this example with Biden, 2/3 as many as Trump), but far fewer blatantly false statements.

The Washington Post maintains a database of Trump falsehoods, which they claim number over 20,000 for the first 1200+ days in office.⁸ One may quibble with their exact count, but in any reckoning its clear that Trump gets his facts wrong much more often than other politicians.

F. Are Republicans the Champions of Lying?

Biden's distortion of Bill Barr's statement (Section E. above) was a sensationalist cheap shot, falsely accusing the Attorney General of equating COVID mask orders with slavery. Still, Barr's original statement was itself a cheap shot, saying mask orders were more of an imposition than anything short of slavery. I wonder what Barr thinks of the military draft? One could at least make the case (though I think that it is a stretch) that merely mentioning masks and slavery in the same sentence was implying that mask orders, while not as bad as slavery, were coming close.

As an unfair attack, this pales in comparison to Mike Pence repeating a common Republican lie at the 2016 Republican convention:

And it was Hillary Clinton who left Americans in harm's way in Benghazi and after four Americans fell said, what difference at this point does it make?⁹

What does "it" in Pence's sentence refer to? Any honest reading would say that the plain meaning of the words is "what difference at this point does Americans dying in Benghazi make?" However, that is not what Clinton was talking about. The topic under discussion was whether Clinton and others had intentionally misled the public by suggesting that the attack on a US facility in Benghazi, Libya, occurred during a protest

⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/>.

⁹ <https://time.com/4416456/republican-convention-mike-pence-video-speech-transcript/>.

outside the facility. Clinton was pushing back against the Republican fixation on the State Department statements:

With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans. Was it because of a protest or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided that they'd go kill some Americans? What difference at this point does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again, Senator.¹⁰

Attacks like this on Hillary Clinton, which have occurred since the 1990s, actually do seem to be in the spirit of Trump. They make an outrageous accusation despite unambiguous information disproving it. I am wondering – and everyone who has voted for Republicans should be wondering – whether Trump is an aberration or a perfection of a Republican model of politics.

Is Trump really something new, or has he just purified a mixture of hatred and dishonesty that has existed for decades on the right?¹¹

G. What Difference *Does* It Make?

If all politicians lie a little, why don't they all lie more?

I think there are two main reasons. One is that in many cases, they actually believe that they are good people, and that lying is bad, and so they only do it when they have a very strong reason to, either to protect themselves or to achieve a goal they think is important. The other is that there is a cost to lying: being caught in a lie opens one up to attack, reduces credibility, and can even end a candidate's political campaign or career.

It is not clear that Donald Trump is capable of feeling guilt, so the first constraint may not apply. By rewarding his serial lying with more political success than probably he even thought possible, you are removing the second constraint as well.

Some Trump supporters dismiss the impact of Trump's lies. "Don't pay so much attention to what he says. It is so ridiculous, only an idiot would believe him!" Unfortunately, there are plenty of stupid people, and even more people who are willing

¹⁰ <https://www.politifact.com/article/2013/may/08/context-hillary-clintons-what-difference-does-it-m/>.

¹¹ I am leaving out a more damaging genre of dishonesty, in which the US President distorts international events and intelligence reports in order to justify attacks on other countries. The Bush administration is infamous for doing this in 2002-2003 when selling the invasion of Iraq, and the Reagan administration habitually did it to justify intervention in Central America, but Democrats have also been guilty of it. I decided that this topic was too complicated to go into here. I am trying to stick to examples where it doesn't take a lot of research to figure out when someone is being dishonest.

to believe stupid things if that delivers an emotional reward. Trump is training these people to approve of the efficacy of lying, to favor falsehood over truth, and to disbelieve honest sources which contradict their leader's lies. Since democracy depends on the ability of citizens to make rational decisions informed by a free press, an army of people trained to believe only their leaders undermines democracy.

Since Trump is untruthful so regularly, he has no credibility. How long before the rest of us begin to assume that everyone who enables Trump's dishonesty are themselves dishonest? Where will that leave the nation?

Love,

B a K