Letters to a Trump Voter –
IV Proud Ignorance

<div align="right">9 October 2020</div>

Dear Dad,

A. Dull on Policy, Brilliant on Marketing

"How do we get him to continue to talk about immigration? We're going to get him to talk about he's going to build a wall." –Sam Nunberg, Trump political advisor[1]

Donald Trump did not consult with security experts or pore over maps of the border before he decided to make a border wall a central policy objective. He did know that he wanted to talk about immigration (see Letter III for why). Nunberg, a political consultant with no special expertise in border security, was afraid that Trump would not stay on-topic, and suggested the wall as a metaphor and a slogan that would appeal to a real estate developer. The slogan got strong reactions from audiences and the rest is history.

The wall is a powerful and easily understood metaphor for keeping bad people out. As propaganda it is a brilliant. It is also a good example for Trump's entire approach to policy. It is based on marketing and propaganda, not on analyzing how to fix a problem. In the case of The Wall, some experts interested in reducing illegal immigration even feared that Trump would trade other, more effective measures away in favor of the wall.

The Wall also symbolizes the divides that Trump is so good at widening. It's not that Democrats were all against the concept of a wall. In the Senate, the Secure Fence Act of 2006, which allocated billions to build hundreds of miles of fencing and walls, passed with a bipartisan 80 votes in the Senate,[2] including yes votes from Biden, Clinton, Obama, and Shumer. That's because the original walls were erected to fix recognized problems in border security. Parts of the border that were not walled were hard to reach, expensive to build, or posed practical difficulties such as being in the middle of the Rio Grande River. Those were the parts that would be walled in Trump's vision of sealing off the entire border.

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[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/05/us/politics/donald-trump-border-wall.html for quote and context of wall. For Nunberg's firing, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/trump-campaign-staffer-sam-nunberg-fired-after-racist-facebook-posts-n402756.

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secure_Fence_Act_of_2006#cite_note-6. The vote was divded along partisan lines in the House however.

Trump supporters try to portray the differing Democratic reaction to Bush's wall and Trump's wall as hypocrisy. They have it exactly wrong. Trump was able to take an issue where there had been some bipartisan agreement, and by unthinkingly making extreme proposals and intentionally using racist rhetoric, he created gridlock over the whole issue.

The population of illegal immigrants rose from less than 4 million in 1990 to 11-12 million at the end of the Bush administration.[3] During the Bush administration, security at the southern border was increased tremendously with greater spending, more officers, and increasingly high-tech measures to catch people crossing over. The growth stopped or even reversed from the 2nd Bush term to the end of the Obama administration. Even the Center for Immigration Studies, which seeks to reduce immigration to the United States, concedes that the number of people here illegally was stable at 11-12 million people during the Obama administration, and that "the illegal flow increasingly isn't people crossing the land border with Mexico, but rather entering legally and then overstaying visas."[4]

The fact that the Wall was an inefficient solution to a non-emergency did not bother Trump, because he is not interested in policy, only marketing.

To me it is infuriating that Trump's supporters portray him as a kind of anti-politician who doesn't say things for political gain. That makes about as much sense as calling him an honest liar because he openly ignores facts. Trump has distilled the essence of being a politician rather than a statesman, pursuing his signature policies based purely on how they play to his audience.

B. Distracted and Uninterested

When Tony Schwartz was hired to write *The Art of the Deal* "with" Trump, he ran into a problem, Trump couldn't sit still very long for an interview before becoming bored.

"it's impossible to keep him focussed on any topic, other than his self-aggrandizement, for more than a few minutes, and even then… That's why he so prefers TV as his first news source… I seriously doubt that Trump has ever read a book straight through in his adult life." – Tony Schwartz.[5]

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[3] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/12/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s/.

[4] https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jul/20/number-of-illegals-levels-off-fewer-crossing-mexic/. The organization quoted here has been called a hate group because of associations with racists and anti-semites: https://www.politifact.com/article/2017/mar/22/center-immigration-studies-hate-group-southern-pov/.

[5] https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/25/donald-trumps-ghostwriter-tells-all.

Americans don't want presidents to be intellectuals, but we prefer them to have a slightly deeper understanding of the issues than what they can get watching cable news. Similar comments have been made by many people who worked closely with the President.

"Trump won't read anything--not one-page memos, not the brief policy papers; nothing. He gets up halfway through meetings with world leaders because he is bored." – Gary Cohn, Trump economic advisor.

"My Attention span is short" – Donald Trump, *Surviving at the Top*.

"Mr. Trump, who has mounted a yearslong attack on the intelligence agencies, is particularly difficult to brief on critical national security matters, according to interviews with 10 current and former intelligence officials familiar with his intelligence briefings... The president veers off on tangents and getting him back on topic is difficult, they said. He has a short attention span and rarely, if ever, reads intelligence reports, relying instead on conservative media and his friends for information." –New York Times

"I know more about ISIS than the generals do." –Donald Trump

"Nobody knows more about trade than me." –Donald Trump

"I know more about renewables than any man on Earth." –Donald Trump

"He's a fucking moron" – Rex Tillerson, Trump's Secretary of State.[6]

Tillerson did not make his remark (which was made in private) as a disgruntled former official fired by Trump. He said it while still Secretary of State, reportedly after Trump responded to a long military briefing by launching a tirade against the generals ending with Trump saying "You're a bunch of dopes and babies."

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[6] Cohn: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/gary-cohn-answers-questions-about-future-at-white-house-with-im-here-today/, reportedly in an email while working in Trump administration. Trump: https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/09/donald-trump-attention-span-214223; New York Times: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/21/us/politics/presidents-daily-brief-trump.html; "I know more about": https://www.axios.com/everything-trump-says-he-knows-more-about-than-anybody-b278b592-cff0-47dc-a75f-5767f42bcf1e.html; Tillerson: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/youre-a-bunch-of-dopes-and-babies-inside-trumps-stunning-tirade-against-generals/2020/01/16/d6dbb8a6-387e-11ea-bb7b-265f4554af6d_story.html?utm_campaign=wp_main&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.

Others working for Trump have defended his style of processing information. National security advisor Robert C. O'Brien said that "The president is laser-focused on the issues at hand"[7] but is critical of conventional wisdom.

Still, it is universally acknowledged that Trump favors intuition over knowledge even compared to famously anti-intellectual president's like George W. Bush or Ronald Reagan. He does not want to hear information that contradicts his ideological conclusions. He seems to overestimate how much he knows about... well, anything.

C. When Push Came to Shove

The Wall is just one example of policy decisions that ignore relevant information and instead rely on Trump's "instinct" (that is, unexamined prejudices). His policy and rhetoric are wildly successful with part of the population because they resonate with many voters' same unexamined prejudices.

This decision style is why I don't trust Trump to carry out good policy in areas where I actually partly agree with his goals, such as in trade. The US has a real problem because people without college degrees are competing with impoverished workers abroad. This directly lowers (or eliminates) factory wages for American workers and indirectly pushes down wages for a much larger group of workers. This has traditionally been a concern that Democrats worried about and that Republicans ignored. For some reason this did not stop you for voting for Republicans in the past.

In the last twenty years, Democrats have been partly won over to the Republican point of view, because there are benefits from free trade to the country as a whole. It may be that trade wars may be less helpful to workers than other policies such as enforcing higher labor standards throughout the world, strengthening unions in the US, and improving health insurance for workers in jobs with bad benefit packages. Of course, Republicans oppose all of these as well.

But outside all these very difficult and complex questions, just look at Trump's tactics. By lumping in other wealthy countries such as Japan, Canada, or Germany with China, he lost a chance to have allies to bring more pressure on China for practices that many countries oppose. In a way, he has been creating an alliance <u>against </u>the US that includes our traditional allies and China.

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[7] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/21/us/politics/presidents-daily-brief-trump.html.

Under Trump, the trade deficit has gotten a little worse.[8] Until the economic crash this year, manufacturing employment went up at about the same rate under Trump as it did under Obama.[9] Also before the economic crash, Chinese retaliation against Trump administration trade measures led to a 20% increase in farm bankruptcies. The Trump administration tried to protect farmers from its own distortions to the free market by raising farm subsidies from $10-13 billion to over $23 billion,[10] meanwhile warning that Joe Biden would institute "socialism" if elected.

Presidents rely on advisors for detailed information that the chief executive lacks. But in Trump's White House, advisors get fired or quit with dizzying speed.[11] Nine of the top 15 Cabinet positions turned over at least once, more than during the first terms of each of the previous 5 presidents, and far more than all but G.H.W. Bush. Almost all of the top White positions (Chief of Staff, National Security Advisor, etc) turned over, many of them two or more times.

For some topics, one can argue over whether the president's intuitive take on policy is better or worse than expert opinion. My next letter will address a crisis where President Trump's incompetence has caused real and obvious harm: the nation's response to Covid-19.

Love,
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[8] https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/BOPGSTB/.
[9] https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MANEMP.
[10] https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/14/donald-trump-coronavirus-farmer-bailouts-359932.
[11] https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/charts-white-house-turnover-breaking-records-n1056101.