



## **Opinion: Graham sums up how stupid the GOP has become**

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Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., in a number of ways epitomizes the Republican Party's descent into intellectual rot and immoral opportunism. Graham as a candidate called out President Trump as a bigot and "the most flawed nominee in the history of the Republican Party."

As one of the late Sen. John McCain's closest friends, Graham decried autocrats, stood up for human rights and castigated President Barack Obama for failing to exercise global leadership. He considered himself a defender of the military and our national intelligence community.

He's now among the worst apologists for President Donald Trump -- vowing to investigate unsubstantiated smears of the DOJ and FBI and insisting there was no collusion between the trump team and the Russians (despite evidence of Paul Manafort's meeting with Konstantin Kilimnick, the Trump Tower June, 2016 meeting and the Roger Stone-WikiLeaks connection.)

Most stunning is his reversal on immigration. Once a member of the Gang of Eight's comprehensive immigration reform he now supports Trump's fear-mongering on the border and even his unprecedented power grab, a declaration of a "national emergency."

There was one remark that perfectly typifies the horrible habits of the Trumpized GOP -- playing to low information voters' ignorance, ignoring real problems in favor of hyperventilating over phony ones, infatuation with authoritarianism and deep cynicism. Here's the relevant exchange on Face the Nation:

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MARGARET BRENNAN: The President just declared a national emergency in regard to getting the funds for his border wall.

SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM: Yeah.

MARGARET BRENNAN: In terms of getting those funds though through this emergency action there's about three point six billion of it--

SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM: Right.

MARGARET BRENNAN: --that could come from military construction efforts, including construction of a middle school in Kentucky, housing for military families, improvements for bases like Camp Pendleton and Hanscom Air Force Base. Aren't you concerned that some of

these projects that were part of legislation that you helped approve in Congress are now going to possibly be cut out?

SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM: Well, the President will have to make a decision where to get the money. Let's just say for a moment that he took some money out of the military construction budget. I would say it's better for the middle-school kids in Kentucky to have a secure border. We'll get them the school they need. But right now we've got a national emergency on our hands. Opioid addiction is going through the roof in this country. Thousands of Americans died last year or dying this year because we can't control the flow of drugs into this country and all of it's coming across the border.

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Thunk. Graham knows the opioid problem doesn't stem from a lax border; he should know however that test scores for kids in rural, red states like Kentucky are atrocious. and that there are problems other than illegal immigration problem (which has been declining) that most affect voters. (For starters if one cares about opioid addicts the last thing to do would be to cut Medicaid as Republicans proposed.)

Let's look at the education picture first. Last year the Lexington Herald Leader reported:

"In 23 schools more than half of the students tested couldn't read beyond a beginner or novice level. Most of those schools were in Jefferson County, with one - William Wells Brown - from Fayette County.

"Only two schools - SCAPA at Bluegrass in Fayette and Marie Gatton Elementary in McClean County - had no students scoring at the lowest level in math.

"Nineteen schools had more than half of those tested performing at the lowest level in math. Sixty-three schools had 40 percent or more of the students tested performing at the bottom level, including Bryan Station High School, William Wells Brown Elementary and Booker T. Washington Elementary in Fayette County.

"In addition to Fayette, six school districts had multiple schools with poor math scores, the Herald-Leader analysis showed."

Kentucky routinely ranks near the bottom in educational attainment. It also lags in healthcare, economic opportunity and has a soaring incarceration rate. Anyone think those factors have far more to do with opioid addiction than the lack of a wall at the border thousands of miles away?

Trump and his Republican enablers don't want to hear the facts:

"The data show that far more drugs are detected at ports of entry than between ports of entry. The Office of Field Operations, working at ports of entry, seized 4,813 pounds of heroin during the first 11 months of fiscal year 2018, through Aug. 31, 2018. During the same period, U.S. Border Patrol, which works between legal ports of entry, seized 532 pounds of heroin. CBP statistics from 2012 through 2017 show similar disparities between heroin seized at ports of entry and heroin seized between ports of entry. The data also show that fentanyl, another opioid, was seized at ports of entry at a higher rate than at points between ports of entry.

From Politifact New York:

"The Drug Enforcement Agency reports similar findings, noting in its 2018 National Drug Threat Assessment that "a small percentage of all heroin seized by CBP along the land border was between ports of entry." . . .

"The agency said 85 percent of the fentanyl that came across the U.S.-Mexico border in 2017 entered through the San Diego port of entry.

"Data and analysis from the drug enforcement and customs agencies have been used by the Congressional Research Service, Cato Institute, and Brookings Institution, among others, to explain the flow of drugs and recommend policy changes.

David Bier, an immigration analyst who writes about border security at the libertarian Cato Institute, said that by saying a 'majority' of opioids come through ports of entry. . . .

"By weight, the average port inspector seized 8 times more cocaine, 17 times more fentanyl, 23 times more methamphetamine, and 36 times more heroin than the average Border Patrol agent seized at the physical border in early 2018," Bier wrote in an email.

While Democrats talk about education as well as other issues like healthcare that have an effect on the quality of people's lives, Republicans' gleefully exploit their voters' ignorance, perpetuating the cycle of scapegoating-poor economic returns-more scapegoating.

Tragically, the dishonest political shenanigans of people like Graham widen inequality (by geography, class and race) and accentuates polarization. They make constructive policy making nearly impossible, and play into the hands of demagogues. It's then that authoritarians like Trump come along who insist "they alone" can fix problems and falsely place blame on outsiders rather than some of their own disastrous policy choices.

At some point it's too much for Republican voters to bear. A Democratic governor won in 2018 in Kansas to repair the self-inflicted fiscal wounds from years of tax cuts that starved the state of needed revenue. Democrats rebound throughout the Rust Belt in 2018 and made inroads in former conservative strongholds like Nevada, Arizona and nonurban Pennsylvania. (Likewise, you've seen a spate of teacher strikes in red states that haven't paid teachers adequately, a recognition that a policy of supply side tax and budget cuts and immigration hysteria do not make for a decent quality of life.)

The strategy of fear, deflection and willful ignorance has a short shelf-life. In the end voters know if their lives are getting worse or better. To the extent Democrats talk to voters about the actual problems and realistic solutions they will go far. They cannot merely deplore the fear-mongering and race-baiting, however deplorable they are. If Democrats address the actual problems of average voters, Republicans will lose power and be forced (maybe) to re-evaluate their approach.

In the meantime the cynical, base-pleasing politics of Trump, Graham and others damage the lives of the most vulnerable Americans, batter our democracy and destroy a sense of national unity. What an awful legacy they will leave.