

The Day

Once again Mulvaney, 'gaffes' the truth

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February 25, 2020

Remember how President Donald Trump said this country could not absorb any more immigrants, legal or illegal? "Our country is full," he declared during a visit to the border, among other occasions, a year ago. "Can't take you anymore ... so turn around."

Imagine my surprise when The Washington Post reported last week that Trump's acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney had described our country at a private gathering in England as being quite the opposite of "full." Instead of having too many newcomers, Mulvaney told the crowd that we have too few, according to an audio recording of his remarks obtained by the Post.

"We are desperate — desperate — for more people. We are running out of people to fuel the economic growth that we've had in our nation over the last four years. We need more immigrants," Mulvaney said.

Oh? That's certainly not what we've been hearing since Trump announced his candidacy five years ago. That's when he infamously accused Mexico of "sending people" who are "bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists, and some, I assume, are good people."

As president he has spent the past three years hardening this country's immigration system into an obstacle course of physical and bureaucratic barriers. Most recently he added Myanmar, Eritrea, Kyrgyzstan, Sudan, Tanzania and Africa's biggest country, Nigeria, to the travel ban.

I wondered, is this another Mulvaney gaffe?

Mulvaney has gained a reputation in his rapid rise to his current job for giving new life to journalist Michael Kinsley's often-quoted definition of a Washington gaffe as "when a politician tells the truth — some obvious truth he isn't supposed to say."

Mulvaney had unspooled a series of job-threatening stumbles late last year. He unintentionally added fuel to the Ukraine scandal's quid pro quo allegations when he tried to dismiss the U.S. withholding of aid under similarly coercive conditions as something that's done "all the time."

On another day, he made some imprudent comments — "He's in the hospitality business" — about Trump's later-reversed intentions to hold this year's G-7 summit at Trump's property in Doral, Fla.

He once described what sounded like the price of his attention during his years in Congress. "If you're a lobbyist who never gave us money, I didn't talk to you. If you're a lobbyist who gave us money, I might talk to you."

Classy, huh?

Candor like that made him a reporter's delight, even as the press and his administration colleagues puzzled as to how he had managed to keep his job.

But Mulvaney's latest reported remarks may touch off earthquakes inside the rest of Team Trump. Particularly prominent: senior policy adviser Stephen Miller, who has been carefully studying immigration policy so he can change it to admit fewer immigrants, whether legal or illegal, and deport more. Miller promotes the widely believed but also widely disputed idea that the steady admittance of newcomers depresses wages, particularly in the low-income brackets, a potential problem that is least likely to happen during a healthy economy. Miller and former Trump adviser Stephen Bannon embraced those arguments during the president's 2016 campaign, which they argued was key to Trump's electoral success in depressed Rust Belt states in the upper Midwest.

The Mulvaney quotes reflect what actually has been the traditional view of the Republican and Wall Street establishment, and libertarian think tanks like the Cato Institute: Immigrants on the whole tend to pay for themselves many times over with their entrepreneurship, strong work ethic and lower crime rate than other Americans.

So, while Trump continues to frighten us with fears of MS-13, the international criminal gang, under every bed, Mulvaney appears to see a more clear and present danger: Young Americans — particularly whites — are not entering the workforce at a high enough rate to keep up with the growing costs of providing Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid for rising numbers of seniors.

As the Wall Street Journal reported in 2018, citing new census data, for most of the past few decades, the ratio of retiree-aged adults to those of working age barely budged. From 1980 to 2010, the ratio of American adults age 65 and over barely budged, sticking around 19 for every 100 Americans between 18 and 64, census data show. But that ratio rose to 21 in 2010 then bumped upward to 25 by 2017, according to numbers released in 2018. That number is expected to continue to rise to 35 by 2030 and 42 by 2060, barring unforeseen circumstances.

So, contrary to Trump's remarks, our country is not "full." We need a serious discussion and action across partisan lines about the country's fiscal future, instead of just kicking the population can down the road.

Clarence Page's columns are distributed by the Tribune Content Agency.