



Why Trump deserves extreme vetting—from the press

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February 9, 2017

With President Trump now in the White House, I've written several pieces criticizing his economic plan, predicting key proposals such as a huge infrastructure plan may never materialize, and asking skeptically when Trump will get around to helping the "forgotten men and women" he championed while campaigning.

Many Trump supporters have attacked those articles, deriding me as a liberal hack criticizing their man in Washington prematurely, for purely ideological reasons. "Did you really expect immediate progress, especially with the pouting Democrats not yet over the election?" one reader emailed. "Your article is the exact reason there is so much hysteria in today's America. Too many ignorant 'journalists' writing BS articles."

I ended up having a civil exchange with that reader, and also decided it would be worth writing a detailed explanation of why I'm applying extreme vetting to Trump's economic agenda, which is the part of his presidency that I cover. I don't speak for other journalists, but it's a safe bet many of my colleagues feel the way I do.

Trump won the presidential election fair and square, although it might be more accurate to say his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, lost the election fair and square. For all of the unsavory controversy Trump ignited, he also found a way to communicate with disenfranchised Americans who feel nobody is looking out for them. Clinton was an inauthentic, unrelatable candidate who squandered gigantic inherited advantages, such as a robust fundraising network and an army of political operatives. She lost because of her own flaws, not because of Vladimir Putin or James Comey or Anthony Weiner.

Trump, however, has a demonstrated contempt for facts and an aversion to rational analysis, which is a big problem that will only get bigger. Candidates often get away with shading the truth while campaigning, because they don't actually have to enact policies. But once elected, bogus facts and biased analysis can be ruinous, because you end up focusing on the wrong problem, and don't address the problem that actually exists.

Trump has already done this with his executive order banning immigrants from 7 predominantly Muslim countries, which became a big business story when prominent companies including Apple (AAPL), Facebook (FB), Microsoft (MSFT) and Intel (INTC) publicly objected to it. The White House has produced no evidence showing there's even a problem with immigration from those countries, other than Trump and his aides insisting there is. Yet that didn't stop him from issuing an order on his eighth day in office that caused real harm to real people, and is now keeping an army of lawyers and judges busy on litigation.

For what it's worth, if Trump's priority were really to protect Americans and save lives, he might want to focus first on gun violence, which accounts for roughly 34,000 deaths in the United States each year—many of them preventable. Since the 9-11 terrorist attacks in 2001, foreign terrorists have killed a grand total of 24 people in the United States, according to a recent analysis by the libertarian Cato Institute. That makes the ratio of gun deaths to terrorist deaths in the United States each year about 23,000:1. Firearm violence causes far more physical harm and economic damage than terrorism, yet Trump is focusing on the 1, not the 23,000.

So why does Trump care so much about the minuscule risk of foreign terrorism? Here's a guess: Because it's hard to get voters riled up about Americans harming Americans. It's a lot easier to trigger an emotional response about foreigners harming Americans—even if that harm is largely theoretical. Creating villains people can blame their problems on has been the modus operandi of demagogues for centuries.

Extend this to Trump's economic agenda. Trump has largely blamed China and Mexico for taking the jobs of hard-working Americans. Many economists and business leaders say that's vastly overstated, because the long-term decline in US manufacturing employment is largely due to robots and automation doing more and more of the work humans used to do. But Trump has said nothing about automation. Robots and algorithms aren't very satisfying villains. Chinese and Mexican workers, by contrast, fulfill the us-versus-them narrative that lets Trump play the hero, beating back the invaders.