

OPINION: Trump's tariffs express his delight in executive swagger

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IS it too much to ask that the government not insult our intelligence while it is lightening our wallets?

As an overture to his predictable announcement of steel and aluminum tariffs, the president, that human sponge ever eager to soak up information, held a “listening session,” at which he listened to executives of steel and aluminum companies urge him to do what he intended to do. He ended this charade of deliberation by announcing the tax increases.

The tariffs — taxes collected at the border, paid by American consumers — on steel and aluminum imports will be 25 percent and 10 percent, respectively, the most severe of the options proposed by his Commerce Department, which impedes the activity denoted by its name. But the 6.5 million employees in steel-using industries (46 times the number of steel-making jobs) and the hundreds of millions of consumers of steel- and aluminum-content products should not complain, they should salute: The president says the tariffs are national-security necessities.

Never mind that the Cato Institute's Colin Grabow notes that defense-related products require only 3 percent and 10 percent of domestic steel and aluminum production, respectively. Or that six of the top ten nations that export steel to the United States have mutual defense agreements with the United States. Or that China, an actual military competitor and potential adversary, is not among the top ten. Or that Canada, a NATO ally, supplies more U.S. aluminum imports than the next eleven countries combined. Or that, as the Washington Post reports, “For nearly a quarter-century under U.S. law, Canada has been considered part of the U.S. defense industrial base, as if its factories were American.” Or that the aluminum for military aircraft and the steel for military vehicles will be more expensive so, effectively, the administration is cutting the defense budget. Cato's Dan Ikenson says the administration's argument seems to be “that an abundance of low-priced raw materials from a diversity of sources somehow threatens national security.”

But, then, invocations of “national security” can rationalize a multitude of sins. Sen. Marco Rubio, R.-Fla., says the sugar-import quotas that enrich a few already rich Floridians are required for America's “food security.” It will be desirable (because educational) if some nations retaliate

for the steel and aluminum tariffs by imposing 25 percent tariffs on Florida citrus in the interest of “food security.”

Electrolux, Europe’s largest manufacturer of household appliances, responded to the U.S. tariffs by suspending plans to invest \$250 million in a Tennessee factory. Before the announcement of the tariffs, which are intended to raise steel prices, Whirlpool’s CEO lamented to analysts that rising prices of steel and other materials might knock \$250 million off Whirlpool’s profits. Whirlpool had just made a rent-seeking raid on Washington, where it successfully sought protection against foreign washing machines — tariffs and import quotas that will punish American purchasers of appliances. As Lily Tomlin says, “No matter how cynical you become, it’s never enough to keep up.”

Regarding trade, Congress has given presidents vast discretion to trifle with Americans’ freedom, the nation’s prosperity, and the world’s hard-won architecture of efficient commerce. Now this capacity for mischief is in the hands of someone who knows next to nothing about the one thing — business — he is supposed to know something about.

Protectionism is a scythe that slices through core conservative principles, including opposition to government industrial policy, and to government picking winners and losers, and to crony capitalism elevated to an ethic (“A Few Americans First”). Big, bossy government does not get bigger or bossier than when it embraces protectionism — government dictating what goods Americans can choose, and in what quantities, and at what prices. Down the decades, Trump has shown an impressive versatility of conviction, but the one constant in the jumble of quarter-baked and discordant prejudices that pass for his ideas has been hostility to free trade. It perfectly expresses his adolescent delight in executive swagger, the objectives of which are of negligible importance to him; all that is important is that the spotlight follows where his impulses propel him.

For more than a century, enlarged executive power wielded by agenda-setting presidents has been the sun at the center of progressives’ solar system of aspirations. Hence protectionism — economic life drenched by politics and directed by unconstrained presidential ukases. So, if on November 6 the Democrats capture either house of Congress, on November 7 there will be, effectively, an accommodating Democrat in the presidency.