



## President Trump's Ever-Changing Reasons for Tariffs

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President Donald Trump can't keep his story straight on trade policy.

He claims his tariffs of 25 percent and 10 percent on foreign steel and aluminum are simultaneously a response to supposed "national security" concerns, a negotiating ploy to bring about freer trade, a long-term solution to increase investment in the United States, and, more recently, a tool to pay off the national debt. (Oh—and they're also apparently a direct answer to Canada's dairy tariffs.)

Trump's tweets about trade over the weekend, which were rife with factual errors and blustering falsehoods, highlighted the many inconsistencies of the White House's messaging on the subject and reinforced the notion that the president views tariffs as *fundamentally good* (perhaps even "the greatest") in their own right. "Tariffs will make our country much richer than it is today. Only fools would disagree," wrote Trump. "We are using them to negotiate fair trade deals and, if countries are still unwilling to negotiate, they will pay us vast sums of money in the form of Tariffs. We win either way."

The president also claimed that his tariffs were working "far better than anyone ever anticipated"—never mind the fact that just two weeks earlier, his administration had to dole out \$12 billion to prop up the U.S. agriculture industry, which is suffering from strained relations with allies and Trump's escalating trade war with China.

"The tweets this weekend kind of reveal an affinity for tariffs and protectionism in and of themselves, not as a tool to achieve free trade, but as literally a tool to achieve prosperity and tariff revenue and industrial policy and manufacturing jobs," said Scott Lincicome, a trade attorney and adjunct scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute.

"You have this just glaring conflict in Trump administration trade policy. Are tariffs a long-term industrial policy/national security strategy, or are they a short-term harm that achieves a greater benefit in the form of true free trade?" Lincicome asked during a phone interview Monday. It can't be both, he said.

But most fascinating in the series of tweets was Trump's suggestion that his tariffs could be used to start to pay off large portions of the United States' more than \$21 trillion in debt.

“It's just nonsensical,” Lincicome summarized.

The *Washington Post*'s Heather Long calculates the revenue from Trump's tariffs, worth \$85 billion on different products, will add up to \$21 billion at most—representing only 0.1 percent of the national debt. And if you subtract \$12 billion to factor in the money the administration borrowed for its agriculture bailout, that number is cut in half. Meanwhile, the debt has increased by more than \$1.4 trillion since Trump signed a major, months-long spending agreement in May 2017, the first time he grappled with massive fiscal legislation as president.

For their part, Republicans in Congress have mixed opinions of the concept. Asked about Trump's claim, House speaker Paul Ryan's office referred THE WEEKLY STANDARD to Ryan's “many statements in opposition to tariffs.” Ryan, while denouncing the use of tariffs, has declined for months to endorse congressional action to roll back Trump's unilateral trade powers, arguing it would undermine the White House's negotiating hand.

Close allies of the president, such as Rep. Matt Gaetz, were more enthusiastic about using tariffs to address the debt. “Love it,” the Florida Republican said in a text on Monday. Of those who were willing to respond, libertarian-minded member Justin Amash provided the strongest statement against Trump's latest justification for the tariffs.

“It's totally ridiculous,” Amash wrote. “First, we barely dent the national debt with tariff revenue. Second, even if we could pay off the national debt this way, it would be a massive tax hike on Americans.”