



Opinions

Trump is sabotaging a successful presidency

by [Hugh Hewitt](#) June 21 at 6:54 PM

Call it the “electric fence presidency.”

President Trump — always confident, always exuberant, always selling — crashes forward with the policies and people he embraces until he hits a shocking obstacle and falls back, at first stunned and disbelieving, but resolving quickly not to get scorched that way again. He adjusts his trajectory and takes off again, pursuing the same goals on an altered path.

In an interview with [Attorney General Jeff Sessions this month](#), I was incredulous at Sessions’s insistence that there was no choice he could make that wouldn’t lead to family separation at the border. It was obviously a morally objectionable practice and just as obviously political suicide. The gathering storm of a public-opinion backlash broke quickly thereafter and increased in severity as journalists descended on the border and parents and grandparents across the country shuddered at the images of children separated from parents charged with misdemeanors.

Border security is a winning issue for Trump, as is the barrier he and the public demand be built as a visible expression of an invisible resolve to control entry into the country. We know [technology is coming](#) that will make ingress into the United States more secure, but even breakthrough technologies will never be as reliable as a patrolled fence.

The president knows that [50,000 unlawful entries](#) across the southern border every month is unacceptable to a majority of Americans. But he did not realize that it is even more unacceptable to separate parents from children as they are assessed for refugee status or deportation. The solution — better, secure facilities for families to remain in pending adjudication of their applications to stay — appeals to large majorities, and perhaps Congress will deliver just such a legislative authorization. Trump keeps doing this kind of thing. He pushes and pushes on policies he intuits are in high demand — rebuilding the military, cutting taxes, ending Obamacare, appointing originalist judges, fighting against the perception of getting fleeced in trade deals — and sticks with them until he sees evidence that his intuition is wrong or that the advice he received on the implementation of that intuition is wrong. He wants the wall. But he doesn’t want the 24-7 crush of awful publicity. So he recalibrated.

That hasn’t happened on trade policy — yet. On immigration, someone led the president into a box canyon of bad policy and worse press, and the shock was severe. It looks to many conservatives that White House trade adviser Peter Navarro is offering advice just as toxic as the advice Trump was given on immigration, but the evidence of blowback isn’t obvious yet. As with the family-separation policy, many Trump allies in Congress are telling him the tariffs are a disaster. There aren’t any visible manifestations of that disaster though, so the president persists.

But losing ground in North Dakota’s U.S. Senate race, Iowa congressional districts and other farm-state contests is a real political cost. The president needs a House majority to protect him from spurious articles of impeachment and to keep a focus on the Justice Department inspector general’s report on corruption of the investigation into Hillary Clinton’s homebrew email server. He also needs a Senate majority to confirm his judicial nominees. Both majorities are threatened by the tariffs, just as they are by the family-separation policy.

It would be wise for the president to keep a list of those who give him awful advice and find them new jobs or basement offices, and to listen more closely to House and Senate Republicans (both leadership and rank and file). They want to win as badly as he does, and they don’t let deeply distorted readings of public opinion throw off their political compass.

Recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel? Excellent. Going to Singapore to meet with Kim Jong Un? Brilliant. Seating Justice Neil M. Gorsuch and 21 federal appeals court judges [thus far](#)? Fantastic choices all. Separating families? Awful from the start and obviously so. If the president consults the score card and then turns for advice to those who have counseled him well, he will carry the day in November — and in 2020 as well.

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