

Politics

Trump's Speeches Feature Mystery Men the White House Won't Name

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- ▶ The president leans on unidentified allies to back policies
 - ▶ White House won't identify people Trump describes in remarks
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Donald Trump during a rally in Tampa on July 31. *Photographer: Zack Wittman/Bloomberg*

One of the biggest supporters of President Donald Trump's trade policies, according to the president, is the unnamed chief executive officer of a mystery company.

"I was with one of the greatest companies in the world. The chief executive officer. Very short while ago. And it really affects him," Trump said at a July 31 campaign rally in Tampa, referring to his controversial use of tariffs. "He said 'You know what, this does affect our company. But, Mr. President, keep going. You're doing the right thing.'"



Trump didn't identify his supporter, and the White House won't say who it is. Trade groups representing the largest U.S. businesses and CEOs have almost universally opposed Trump's disruptive approach to trade. But the person fits a model: an anonymous figure -- important and powerful -- who invariably supports the president's position, according to Trump himself.

They are fixtures of Trump's speeches, defying conventional wisdom and popping up to back the president on issues including prison reform and immigration, in addition to trade. In some cases Trump's accounts are rebutted by the people he seems to describe. Key details change when he repeats the stories.

'Finds His Own'

"Many of these anecdotes have either not been verified or they're unverifiable," said Robert Rowland, who teaches presidential rhetoric at Kansas University and is writing a book about Trump's speaking style. "When he doesn't have hard data to cite, he goes to these kinds of anecdotes. When he doesn't have real anecdotes, it appears that he finds his own."

The White House did not respond to requests for comment.

One of the president's favorite anecdotes involves a friend who, Trump claims, hired a group of ex-convicts. The facts in the story have changed with each retelling.

During a May 18 White House event on overhauling the federal prison system, Trump said: "I have a friend; he hired three people. They were prisoners, pretty hard-line people. I can tell you, two of the three, he said, are unbelievably outstanding."

During a June 29 speech at the White House, he said: “And there’s one gentleman in particular, he hired ten inmates, never did it before. And he said, I wouldn’t say he said all of them, but he said seven of them are so incredible. Not a bad percentage.”

And a July 18 Cabinet meeting, Trump said: “In one case, a friend of mine hired 10 people. And of the 10 people -- he didn’t give me the exact number, but I will tell you, he said, ‘These are incredible people.’”

The White House would not identify the president’s friend.

Trump’s use of anonymous validators is especially noticeable in his defense of trade policies that have hurt farmers and rocked markets. Speaking to supporters, the president often launches into dramatic narrations of his negotiations with unnamed foreign leaders, describing how they ultimately bent to his will.

European Rebuttal

The day before European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker visited the White House last month, Trump indicated that his tough policies had forced Europe to the negotiating table.

“They didn’t want to change. I said, ‘OK. Good. We’re going to tariff your cars,’” Trump told thousands of veterans at a conference on July 24. “They said, ‘When can we show up? When can we be there? Would tomorrow be OK?’”

A European official with knowledge of the matter disputed Trump’s account, and said the meeting was mutually agreed to when Juncker and Trump met at the G-7 in Canada. The official did not want to be named publicly correcting the president.

At a joint press conference with Trump after their meeting, Juncker began his remarks by saying: “I was invited by the president to the White House.”

During the meeting, Trump agreed not to move forward with auto tariffs while the Europeans committed to hold further discussions about the trade relationship.

Trump has also repeatedly recited a conversation he says he had with an unidentified official from the “highest echelons of China.” In Trump’s telling, the official explains that the U.S. trade deficit with China has ballooned because previous administrations did not protest when the Chinese government added trade barriers and engaged in unfair treatment.

“One of the great people of China said, ‘There was never anybody to talk to in the United States,’” Trump said last month in an interview with CNBC. “‘Nobody would ever complain until you came along.’ Me. And they said, ‘Now, you’re doing more than complaining.’”

The Chinese embassy in Washington did not respond to a request for comment.

‘Rewriting of History’

Eric Altbach, who served as deputy assistant U.S. Trade Representative for China Affairs during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, said Trump’s characterization reflected a “rewriting of history.” Altbach participated in several meetings where U.S. officials raised concerns about trade with their Chinese counterparts when he served in government.

“If China implemented a policy that harmed a U.S. exporter or a U.S. investor or U.S. farmers, the odds of nobody noticing and nobody saying anything about it and it sailing by unchallenged by senior U.S. officials are approximately zero,” said Altbach, vice president of the Albright Stonebridge Group in Washington.

Trump’s use of anonymous supporters is one of many verbal devices common to his public remarks. The president also has a habit of saying “we’ll see” <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/02/us/politics/trump-well-see-what-happens.html> and giving timelines of “two weeks” <https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-06-06/in-trump-s-white-house-everything-s-coming-in-two-weeks> for policy outcomes and announcements.

His reliance on unidentified supporters also stands in contrast with Trump’s criticism of the use of anonymous sources by the news organizations covering him. He has frequently accused

reporters of fabricating sources.

Trump's unnamed allies have a lot in common. They are usually described as high-ranking and highly talented. They are almost always men.

Many fit the mold of Trump's friend "Jim," whom the president cited on the campaign trail to make the case that immigration had harmed Paris. Jim is "a very, very substantial guy" who stopped making annual trips to Paris due to immigration-related crime and terrorism, Trump said during a speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference last year. The president did not provide Jim's last name, and the White House declined to identify him, according to the Associated Press.

'A Wing and a Prayer'

While other presidents occasionally added embellishments to enhance their storytelling, Trump's use of nameless characters stands out, said Rowland, who has written about the rhetorical styles of presidents Barack Obama and Ronald Reagan. Trump's anecdotes tend to portray him as the hero, Rowland said.

Obama would regularly name people in speeches, weaving stories of everyday Americans into his remarks to argue that his policies had an impact. While Obama usually cited first and last names, at times he only used broad descriptors.

Reagan was known to occasionally stray from the truth. In 1983, he told a story about a Medal of Honor recipient -- a bomber commander in World War II whose plane had been hit. The commander, Reagan said, went down with an injured gunner instead of parachuting to safety. After a journalist was unable to verify the account, the anecdote was later identified as being derived from the movie 'A Wing and a Prayer.'

Trump occasionally hints at where his anonymous supporters might originate.

In February, the president told a gathering of Republican lawmakers that his administration had "fulfilled far more promises than we promised"-- a memorable line that got good play on cable news.

Three weeks later, Trump gave credit for the line to "somebody" on television.

And at his rally in Tampa last month, Trump said it was a "brilliant" pundit who made the claim.

“One of the pundits said that: ‘He’s made a lot of promises and, you won’t believe it, but he’s actually kept far more promises than he made,’” Trump said, expressing surprise. “Did you ever hear that one?”

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