

What President Trump was talking about in his baffling rant about wind energy

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ANALYSIS:

US President Donald Trump's political speeches are shaped by two tendencies. The first is that he pays attention to the lines that get the best response, and he'll eventually narrow his rhetoric to highlight those zingers. The other is that he'll follow whatever train of thought is headed out of the station, letting his speeches spiral well out into the countryside before he brings them back in.

Combine those - quick riffs stripped of most context and the tendency to springboard off in any direction - and you get a partial explanation for his speech to a pro-Trump youth group over the weekend.

The section of the speech that has attracted the most attention was this one.

"We'll have an economy based on wind. I never understood wind. You know, I know windmills very much. I've studied it better than anybody. I know it's very expensive. They're made in China and Germany mostly - very few made here, almost none. But they're manufactured tremendous - if you're into this - tremendous fumes. Gases are spewing into the atmosphere. You know we have a world, right? So the world is tiny compared to the universe. So tremendous, tremendous amount of fumes and everything. You talk about the carbon footprint - fumes are spewing into the air. Right? Spewing. Whether it's in China, Germany, it's going into the air. It's our air, their air, everything - right? So they make these things and then they put them up."

king about, it's worth considering how he got to this point and where he went next.

He began by talking about how, on the night of the 2016 election, no one thought he would win. (He included a complaint that they called him "Donald Trump" at the time, instead of "President Trump.") The reason the media got it wrong? Because many people didn't tell exit pollsters who they voted for - and "100 percent of the people who said that voted for us." (This isn't how exit polling works, and it isn't why Trump was considered an underdog.)

Nonetheless, he said, "we're in a battle of survival of this nation" - as exemplified by the Green New Deal.

He doesn't want to knock it too much right now, he said, because he attacked Elizabeth Warren too early, and she rebounded. (Or so he claims.) He then attacked the Green New Deal, including calling Senator Mazie Hirono "not the smartest person on the planet" because, he said, she supports the Green New Deal even though it bans air travel (it doesn't). Trump claimed that Hirono supported building a train to Hawaii instead, which is the exact opposite of accurate; when people presented the (inaccurate) claim to Hirono that the Green New Deal demanded that all air travel be curtailed, it was Hirono who joked about the train not being terribly feasible for her home state.

But this is how it goes in a Trump speech.

At that point Trump got to his riff above about wind power. He would then go on to complain about how wind turbines are aesthetically unappealing, expensive, lower property values and kill birds. That last part, at least, is true: Turbines are often erected in places with wind patterns that are also used by birds, and turbines kill hundreds of thousands of birds a year. It's a weird complaint coming from Trump, though, since far more birds are killed by glass-covered buildings and skyscrapers like the ones he brags about building.

Trump came by his hostility to wind energy through the back door. Many conservatives oppose it because they see it as antagonistic to fossil-fuel energy and a sop to climate change activists. Trump hates wind energy - has "studied it better than anybody" - because about a decade ago he bought a golf course in Scotland only to learn that an offshore wind farm was planned nearby. He worried this would hurt views from his course, so he launched a scorched-earth campaign to block the installation.

It earned him enormous enmity in the area. One prominent local opponent was identified as Scotsman of the year by Glenfiddich Scotch. Trump subsequently banned Glenfiddich from his properties.

But this was the genesis of his "turbines are noisy, dangerous and kill birds" argumentation, now streamlined

and repurposed to young conservatives whose opposition to wind energy is more theoretical.

When I first read the part of Trump's speech about fumes, I was honestly a bit baffled despite priding myself on my ability to translate Trump's energy-related rhetoric. Earlier this month, I pointed out that Trump had never once articulated an understanding of how climate change works, suggesting that perhaps he doesn't know. Was this line about fumes and our small planet an attempt to articulate some explanation of why wind energy is being hyped in the first place?

I have come to the conclusion that, no, it is not. In fact, he appears to be intentionally echoing an accurate point made about greenhouse-gas emissions in service of his baffling anti-wind jeremiad.

Here, again, is what he said.

"But they're manufactured tremendous - if you're into this - tremendous fumes," Trump claimed. "Gases are spewing into the atmosphere. You know we have a world, right? So the world is tiny compared to the universe. So tremendous, tremendous amount of fumes and everything. You talk about the carbon footprint - fumes are spewing into the air. Right? Spewing. Whether it's in China, Germany, it's going into the air. It's our air, their air, everything - right?"

In other words: Manufacturing wind turbines creates "fumes," which go into the atmosphere. We have only one

atmosphere, shared by Germany, China and ourselves. So when they make wind turbines, it's putting those same "fumes" into the air that we breathe.

This, of course, is exactly the problem with carbon dioxide emissions. When the United States or China or India emit greenhouse gases, they sit in the same atmosphere, spurring warming. That's why international agreements - like the Paris climate accord from which he started to withdraw the United States in 2017 - are aimed at lowering emissions across the planet. What Trump's claiming is that the bigger problem is these manufacturing "fumes," contrasting it unfavorably with the "carbon footprint."

There are certainly often issues with any large-scale industrial production, and wind energy is no different. But it's awfully cynical to argue that purported air pollution from manufacturing wind turbines is more problematic than the warming that results from unchecked burning of fossil fuels. Even assuming there are dangerous fumes emitted from making wind turbines, the scale wouldn't compare to the international emissions of carbon dioxide and methane.

One bit of subtext is important to highlight. During the 2016 election, as he was competing in Iowa, he was confronted by a woman whose husband worked for a turbine manufacturer. He was asked whether he supported subsidies to promote the industry and, hemmed in, offered tepid support.

In 2020, there's no contest in Iowa and no real question he'll win the state. So even US.-based wind turbine manufacturing is disparaged, swept back into his broad anti-wind line of argument.

The line about fumes was clunky and attracted attention. But, rest assured, it will either be streamlined and refined or cut from the rotation entirely in Trump's future speeches. What's important to Trump isn't the accuracy of what he's saying, after all. What's important is the extent to which his base appreciates it.