

A Listening Tour Through Trump Territory: Public Policy and the “Towns in Between”

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This is a challenging time to study public policy, given the bitter political divisions in the United States. Competing world views challenge our sense of common national purpose. The electoral shocks of November 8, 2016 have made this a hard time to teach public policymaking skills: data analysis, coalition building and use of legislative precedents. At the public policy school where I work, we need to teach these skills to the next generation of public servants. Students need insights about how to assist communities where voters feel left behind by the forces of globalization and changing job markets.

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There are many ways to take the pulse of the country. Supposedly scientific polls have failed us in recent elections—too many have been dead wrong. They miss too many voters. They fail to capture the motives, the hopes and fears behind the choices voters make.

After months of struggling to explain the Trump agenda in my University of Virginia classrooms, I decided that to become a better teacher, I needed to take a road trip. I’ve crisscrossed the country enough times to visit almost every state. Yet, I’ve rarely ventured south of Richmond. So the route was designed to take me through the small towns of southwestern Virginia, eastern Tennessee, clear down to the Alabama River and Selma, then run north through upcountry South Carolina to the Smoky Mountains. Avoiding the interstates, I would loop back and forth to towns from Marion, Virginia to Maplesville, Alabama to Black Mountain, North Carolina. The laptop was left behind and the iPhone turned off. The primary news source for nine days was going to be hard copies of the disappearing local dailies. The *Bristol News-Courier* and the *Asheville Citizen-Times* offer insights into community concerns you won’t get from cable news.

The search would be for anecdotes, not reams of data, to try to get a better feel for what lives were like in these places. The goal was simply to listen to random people

on street corners, in diners, and in gas stations. I asked questions of country store clerks and waitresses, firemen and people in drug rehab programs, old guys out on a biker road trip with *Easy Rider* jackets, and truckers I met at a wayside Ramada Inn. This is what I heard:

Alienation

Americans I met in these states feel that their government is so remote and out of touch with their lives that it could be staffed by aliens. It is only a few hundred miles from Mountain Valley, Virginia to Richmond, or from Anniston, Alabama to Washington D.C. Yet out on forested back roads, these capitals seem as far away as Afghanistan. The citizens I talked to do not believe that anybody on the government payroll understands or cares about their problems. Government functionaries, in their telling, have been reduced to some “Other,” not of our own communities.

Jobs and Drugs

The top issues heard in most every town are jobs and opioids. Upward mobility seems unattainable. The refrain from many is, as a middle-aged woman at the Marion 7-11 put it: “Bill Clinton took my job and gave it to Asia with that NAFTA thing (sic).” These were good jobs at textile plants and small parts manufacturing facilities that left in the 1970s and 1980s (years before President Clinton’s 1992 election.) The shared narrative among the rural working class is that of victimhood—the certainty that somebody in power has done this to them. It doesn’t matter whether the villains are said to be Wall Street financiers or trade dealmakers or Washington lobbyists. Left behind in these towns often less educated workers and a shrinking revenue base to support local public schools. Growing directly from this sense of being hurt by globalization is the spiraling cycle of health care concerns and opioid addiction.

Strangers shared personal details with me, including a teacher in Tennessee with an old sports injury, who fell prey to reliance on Vicodin and Xanax. A Virginia town official explained how the opioid crisis extended across his community. He recounted how pillars of the town had been brought down by, in his words, “big pharmaceutical companies peddling supposedly non-addicting pain killers.” Cheap heroin is readily available in many of these rural communities. A weathered, heavily-tattooed truck driver drinking beer outside a Birmingham beltway hotel warned me not to cross the street to the Shell Mini-Mart, where furtive figures could be seen working the parking lot—he said peddling “dime bags” of drugs. A police car slowly circled the block, observing the trade. The highway outside Bristol on a blue sky Tuesday morning had a mile-long line of a dozen county and state police cars; they were randomly searching passing cars in an anti-drug dragnet.

Access to drug rehab facilities is limited; I was told that only one in ten can find a scarce program slot. Hospital emergency rooms are said to turn away opioid cases. Voters I met often do not understand how health care markets work; few have good coverage. As important as access to health care remains for almost every Trump voter I talked to, few have ever had a good plan for preventive health care. Hundreds of people in some of these communities line up for free dental clinics. More than one voter brought up the fact that Members of Congress and corporate CEO’s give themselves gold-plated policies using taxpayer and investor funds.

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Education and Healthcare

People worry as their small towns shrink and the brightest young adults leave the region that schools will decline further. I heard zero complaints about high taxes or unbalanced budgets—and virtually no mention of the fact that the U.S. has been at war for sixteen years now. Data suggests military service falls disproportionately upon the rural poor, yet Southwest Asia and the Sunni-Shia contests with ISIS seemed otherworldly in these communities.

Several town officials mentioned plunging support for public education. They pointed to the gerrymandering of school district lines to protect wealthier suburban schools at the expense of inner city schools, for example, in Alabama. Each voter seemed to hold tight to their personal narrative of grievance. They were eager to share them with someone with time to listen. These narratives have become essential to their identity. Such identity politics help develop tribal factions. They focus on what *separates* Americans in a zero sum game, not on our shared values. Demagogues on the extremes of both major parties can win primary campaigns while fanning these flames.

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Americans on small town street corners are still remarkably friendly and welcoming to strangers. I met a local mayor busy in the morning heat collecting Memorial Day flags and signs covering City Hall lawn. He insisted on introducing me to a WWII vet after he learned of my Dad’s Army service in Germany. He then gave me a capsule history of the town’s declining job market. A first responder dealing with a fender bender in another one-stoplight town walked me into City Council chambers to learn about local economic development issues.

People were generous with their time, road directions and local dining tips. They seemed inured to the cable news shout-fests occasionally on screen in bars or diners. At one Alabama eatery, when the James Comey Senate testimony came on, a trucker begged the waitress to change the channel to “Morning with Kelly.” Nobody talked about Prime Minister May’s setbacks in Britain. The stunning French elections never came up. NATO seemed as far away as Pluto.

Trump and Clinton

Few Trump voters I met seemed to like Donald Trump. Several maintained he is a ‘bully’ and a ‘braggart’. Some believed he has been engaged with Russian money men for years. Several who voted for Trump explained their vote as one of disgusted protest. Voting for Trump, one Selma clerk explained, was the “only way I had to flip off that Washington crowd.” Few seemed to regret their vote, even those who doubted Trump would last his full term.

A couple of people in different states made the argument that *because* Trump got rich gaming the system, he must be very clever. They hoped he might game the system to help *them*, too. I met plenty of anti-Trump Republicans, some anti-Clinton Democrats, as well as disgusted independents, mostly millennials. None of these voters said they were satisfied with recent choices. When I asked several voters who are their heroes now in public life, long silences ensued.

Growth and the Future

Nobody brought up the Paris climate agreement or the EPA. Yet, I did learn of

worries in small towns about more pipelines and eminent domain seizures by distant corporations. Some of these towns used to have horrendous flooding and pollution issues, older voters recall. Eastern Tennessee cities have thrived through TVA investments and DoD jobs from Oak Ridge to Chattanooga.

The one federal program I heard mentioned by name most often was HUD's Community Development Block Grants. Several of these grants have apparently helped decaying towns revitalize Main Streets. Marion, Virginia, refurbished a rundown movie theatre for country music festivals. Alabama has used federal grants to help bring tourist dollars to the civil rights heritage trail in Birmingham and Selma. Trump supporters know this HUD program has already been singled out for elimination; two officials volunteered that they have written letters in protest.

What other public policy proposals got support? An infusion of funds to create far more slots in drug rehab facilities. Help to bring high speed internet and cell phone connections, essential for new business ventures, to the scores of towns on Virginia's Route 29 south and along Highway 11 in rural South Carolina. Voters in Asheville and Birmingham also worried about the way new money pushes service workers farther and farther out as downtown housing prices skyrocket. Few waitresses and barmen can afford to live in town.

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Immigration and Race

My Mom was born in Birmingham to conservative parents, but she is a fierce human rights champion who revered Dr. King and the Kennedys, and raised her four sons in California public schools. So my Alabama visit, my first to her mother and grandad's native ground, astonished me. The white enclave of Forest Park, above the golf club where her granddaddy A.B. Harris won the 1916 Alabama State Championship, is now run by the city as a public rec center. It is populated by a crowd of whites, blacks, Hispanics and Asian-Americans. Downtown is booming with diverse young folks. The Birmingham Black Barons' ballpark is now in a hot neighborhood, peopled by Yuppies on bike paths with yoga mats slung over their shoulders.

It seemed an urbanists' fantasy of post-racial America, until you visited the soup kitchen for scores of homeless, just one block west of the beer gardens. Or you listened to the fears a retired black school teacher shared in a conversation at the Civil Rights Institute, her concern that "we are going backwards" on race.

Poor white folks in mountain towns seemed more worried about immigration out of job fears, as well as concerns they'll have to foot the welfare bills of new arrivals. Yet even the tiniest Alabama River towns had Chinese and Mexican families running eateries apparently popular with the locals. Generally, people seemed to understand the local norms for race relations. Nobody brought up the proposal for a so-called "Muslim ban."

Religion, Nascar and guns are important parts of life in most communities I visited. People in Bristol, Martinsville, Talladega and Lynchburg seem to believe these are givens. After touring these places, and the towns in between, I *get* it. Although, as one white waitress volunteered in a Selma sandwich shop, "ya' don't exactly need machine guns for duck hunting."

The deeper you go into the countryside of southernmost Appalachia, the more

poverty you encounter on dirt roads checkered by rundown mobile homes. Churches were ubiquitous. Faith obviously is a major element of life in backcountry communities. In conversation with the pastor of the 16th Street Baptist Church across from the Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham, he noted that the biggest issue for his parishioners today is not race *per se*. It is school district gerrymandering, which has the effect of keeping the poor districts ill-equipped and understaffed. He stated that even if the State of Alabama *doubled* its support for public schools, it would still rank last among the 50 states. He declared that the ladder of upward mobility has been removed for the poor, white and black alike.

The brutal assaults on civil rights activists were on my mind when I reached Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge. Visitors to the new National Park Service interpretive center at its foot are reminded that it was everyday working people who showed the greatest courage to move the nation forward in dark times. Exhibits captured moments of violence against peaceful demonstrators. Racial tensions still run deep, one sensed, yet much of the poverty I saw on this trip could be colorblind.

The road ninety miles east to Montgomery takes you through the cotton fields and muddy creeks, where civil rights activists marched bravely one week in 1965. A marker where a Michigan mother ferrying riders was murdered by the KKK is now fenced off on the lonely roadside, to prevent repeated acts of vandalism. Yet there are more Confederate flags flying on the rural routes of blue state Virginia than I noticed in rural Georgia and Alabama. On these back roads in the Deep South, you can't help but think of burning buses and martyred Freedom Riders. What resonates in the memory also is Martin Luther King's prophecy: "History will record that the great tragedy of this period of social transition," he wrote in 1963, "was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people."

Looping back north, the casual driver is greeted by the extraordinary beauty of out-of-the-way places. Rolling hills in upcountry towns along South Carolina's Route 11 abound with melons and peaches. Long blue mountain views reach out below Asheville. The meadows above the Dan River in southwest Virginia recall a simpler time.

The countryside still has lots of room. Driving some of these roads, you can understand better the skepticism some rural voters have for the notion that global warming is going to kill us all. Yet it was great to finally hear an Army vet state matter-of-factly that it is a sin to destroy the God-given inheritance of the planet we must pass on to our kids, suggesting common cause with urban dwellers.

The Road Home...and the Road Ahead

The last night was spent along the Jerry Falwell Parkway near Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. People at a diner politely endured my probing about faith and politics. I got the notion then to try to establish an exchange dialogue between UVA students and a Liberty University public policy class taught by a former Tea Party member of Congress. (Our classrooms are barely a hundred miles apart. Students' takeaways from our two different schools should bridge a gap that now seems far greater than is healthy for the nation.)

We need to listen to each other. People who cling to past grievances are not

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competent to chart a unifying vision for the nation. Voters on both extremes have been manipulated by cable TV shouters and negative campaign ads. Their grievances are fed, until compromise seems like surrender. We saw it in Charlottesville earlier this spring when the Batten School hosted the local U.S. congressman for a public forum in Charlottesville. Hundreds of protesters showed up on March 31 outside UVA's Garrett Hall. Extremists on both sides baited an angry crowd, while more than eighty heavily armed county police and state troopers struggled to prevent violence.

How can we do the crucial work of building forward-looking public policies, one wonders, if we do not respect those with whom we disagree? We have got to break out of our closed-loop circles of noise. The French voters have just done that, rejecting partisans and extreme parties from the far left and fascist right. Surely Americans are capable of similar courage, and would rally around a 'radical centrist' like Emmanuel Macron.

Americans from the political left and right share a reverence for our Founders. Madison and Monroe, Patrick Henry and Alexander Hamilton, it need be recalled, were bold experimenters. None were strict 'constructionists'. Thomas Jefferson even suggested constitutions should be amended every twenty years, declaring that "we might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him as a boy as civilized society to remain under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors."

In just one generation, our Founders broke from the British and defeated the world's greatest military power in the American Revolution. Soon thereafter, they dumped the Articles of Confederation and created a brand new Constitution. Then, almost before the ink was dry, they proposed to amend it ten times. In short, America's Founders were never slavish defenders of their own "original intent," but were willing to experiment with new governing approaches as circumstances required. Their risk-taking should inspire modern patriots to try new policies – and even constitutional reforms – to make our government more relevant and responsive to the alienated citizens I heard on my listening tour.

My last stop, as I wove through the backroads in the forests of Buckingham County up towards Scottsville, was at an isolated farmhouse. This was the hallowed place where a sugar merchant from Manassas, a Mr. McLean, moved his family for safety after the Civil War erupted in his backyard at the first Battle of Bull Run, only to have the five-year war come find him and his family and, essentially, end in his parlor. Some Jesuit priests and a couple of truant school kids join me in the small room in McLean's home, just across from Appomattox Courthouse where Generals Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee met.

It was here that General Grant offered the defeated southerners their own horses for spring planting. He then instructed Union soldiers to break open boxcars and feed tens of thousands of their famished Confederate brethren. As we listened to the famous story, retold in the clinging heat of a late spring morning, the remarkable charity of the event comes into focus. The wounds from that conflict have taken more than 150 years to heal. How important it seems now to keep doing the work, especially as KKK marchers protest this season over renaming all the Jefferson Davis Highways and Lee memorials dividing towns from New Orleans to Charlottesville.

In the May of 1961, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy gave a forceful speech on

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civil rights at the University of Georgia. He made the case that championing human rights for all must be part of our national defense strategy. Our values, he argued, lie at the heart of what makes America truly exceptional. Our shared beliefs provide the glue that binds a nation of immigrants together against foreign tyrants and dictators. The theme seems highly relevant today in another time of division.

Just before I caught my last turn north towards home, one more rusting silver historical plaque on the roadside caught my eye. It marked a small pull-over beside a low garden gate leading to a line of eight graves. These were the last men to die on that last morning in April 1865. Tended by Daughters of the Confederacy, the tiny cemetery on this Appomattox ridge has modest gravestones of enemy soldiers, buried next to each other, Confederate and American flags side by side.

The simple scene offered an echo of a theme that runs through much of Western literature. As Cervantes reveals near the conclusion of *Don Quixote*, it is actually not the destination, but the shared journey, that matters most in our lives. This essential notion helped drive home to me the most important lesson of my 1600-mile road trip.

Americans are going to continue to live and die side by side. Since Plymouth and Jamestown, our fortunes as a community have been bound together. Time and again, we have listened to the 'better angels of our nature'. Demagogues who fuel division have been overcome by patriotic centrists. So, we owe it to our ancestors and our shared future to reach to the center. We need to celebrate our common values, our common heritage. To move toward common ground, we need to do the hard work of listening, really *listening* to each other. That is how we can both honor our past and join together for a brighter future for all. That is how we can become better teachers, students and public-spirited citizens.

About the Author

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