

Bill Kaplan: Trump to rural Wisconsin, drop dead

Posted on Monday, May 13, 2019

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There's sparkling glitter around Trump. However, beneath the pizzazz, the tycoon has scorn for farmers and rural Wisconsin. Trump's policies effectively say 'drop dead'. Why?

"The year was already shaping up to be difficult for Midwestern (Wisconsin) farmers. Incomes have slipped, farm bankruptcies have increased and widespread flooding (climate change) has inundated the region, killing cattle and turning some fields into unplowable pits. Then came Friday's news from Washington: Trade negotiations with China, long a reliable buyer of Midwestern crops, ended without a deal. ... Trump raised tariffs on \$200 billion worth of imports (from China), and the Chinese were weighing countermeasures" (New York Times).

It was another escalation in Trump's trade wars against China, Canada, European Union and Mexico. Wisconsin farmers are reeling from retaliatory tariffs on dairy products, corn, cranberries, ginseng, kidney beans and soybeans, as well as beef and pork. The resultant economic fallout will pulverize rural towns. Small banks, farm machinery dealers and other family businesses are at risk. And, a farm crisis will cause population declines, threatening rural hospitals and schools.

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Wisconsin Democratic Representative Ron Kind said: "Unilateral tariffs will not bring China to the negotiating table. Instead of a tariff hike, we need to work together with our trade allies to hold China accountable for their trade practices, and level the playing field for Wisconsin businesses." Earlier, Wisconsin Democratic Senator

Tammy Baldwin said: “(Trump’s) talked over time about how much he cares about ... dairy farmers, but he hasn’t really followed up with any certainty. Our farmers need good trade deals, not trade wars.” Both spot on.

“Wisconsin’s milk farmers face extinction” (New York Times). Low and falling milk prices have led to increased economic misery. Wisconsin lost more than 700 dairy farms over the last year. And Trump’s trade wars led to loss of foreign markets, perhaps permanently. “In 2018, farm income nationally was \$63.1 billion, the second lowest total in a decade” (New York Times). Note: Trump’s trade wars began in early 2018. Moreover, the Commerce Department reported that in the first quarter of 2019, “(p)ersonal income for farmers fell by the most in three years” (Jennifer Rubin, Washington Post). There’s more.

Politico reported: “Economists in the Agriculture Department’s research branch say the Trump administration is retaliating against them for publishing reports that shed negative light on White House policies... .” One report had indicated that the Trump tax cuts “would largely benefit the wealthiest farmers” Further, the Trump budget cuts the Agriculture Department by 15 percent, including crop insurance that protects farmers from depressed prices and weather-related natural disasters. Conservation programs, rural housing loans and economic development spending are cut or eliminated. No!

Democrats must reach out to farmers and small rural towns. It’s right morally and smart politically. Former North Dakota Democratic Senator Heidi Heitkamp has launched the “One Country Project” to listen and respond to farmers and others in rural small towns. We are all Americans. We need hope and real solutions, not drop dead policies.

- Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C. for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.