

Ignorant Trump and His Ignorant Followers Who Hate Competent Experts as Elites

By Paul Krugman

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(Adapted from Krugman's article "Ignorance is Strength")

When I travel to Asia, I'm fairly often met at the airport by someone holding a sign reading "Mr. Paul." Why? In much of Asia, names are given family first, personal second — at home, the prime minister of Japan is referred to as [Abe Shinzo](#). And the mistake is completely forgivable when it's made by a taxi driver picking up a professor.

It's not so forgivable, however, if the president of the United States makes the same mistake when welcoming the leader of one of our most important economic and security partners. But there it was: Donald Trump referring to Mr. Abe as, yes, Prime Minister Shinzo.

Mr. Abe did not, as far as we know, respond by calling his host President Donald.

Trivial? Well, it would be if it were an isolated instance. But it isn't. What we've seen instead over the past three weeks is an awesome display of raw ignorance on every front. Worse, there's no hint that either the White House or its allies in Congress see this as a problem. They appear to believe that expertise, or even basic familiarity with a subject, is for wimps; ignorance is strength.

We see this on legal matters: In a widely quoted analysis, the legal expert Benjamin Wittes described the infamous executive order on refugees as "[malevolence tempered by incompetence](#)," and noted that the order reads "as if it was not reviewed by competent counsel at all" — which is a good way to lose in court.

We see it on national security matters, where the president continues to rely on a chief adviser who, suspicious closeness to the Kremlin aside, appears to get his strategic information from [right-wing conspiracy theorists](#).

We see it on education, where the hearings for Betsy DeVos, the education secretary, revealed her to be completely ignorant about even the most elementary issues.

We see it on diplomacy. How hard is it to ask someone from the State Department to make sure that the White House gets foreign leaders' names right? Too hard, apparently: Before the Abe flub, the official agenda for the state visit by Theresa May, the British prime minister, repeatedly [misspelled](#) her name.

And on economics — well, there's nobody home. The Council of Economic Advisers, which is supposed to provide technical expertise, has been demoted from cabinet rank, but that hardly matters, since nobody has been nominated to

serve. Remember all that talk about a trillion-dollar infrastructure plan? If you do, please remind the White House, which hasn't offered even a ghost of a concrete proposal.

But let me not be too hard on the Tweeter-in-chief: disdain for expertise is general in his party. For example, the most influential Republican economists aren't serious academics with a conservative bent, of whom there are many; they're [known hacks](#) who literally [can't get a number right](#).

Or consider the current G.O.P. panic over health care. Many in the party seem shocked to learn that repealing any major part of Obamacare will cause tens of millions to lose insurance. Anyone who studied the issue could have told them years ago how the pieces of health reform fit together, and why. In fact, many of us did, repeatedly. But competent analysis wasn't wanted.

And that is, of course, the point. Competent lawyers might tell you that your Muslim ban is unconstitutional; competent scientists that climate change is real; competent economists that tax cuts don't pay for themselves; competent voting experts that there weren't millions of illegal ballots; competent diplomats that the Iran deal makes sense, and Putin is not your friend. So competence must be excluded.

At this point, someone is bound to say, "If they're so dumb, how come they won?" Part of the answer is that disdain for experts — sorry, "so-called" experts — resonates with an important part of the electorate.

Bigotry wasn't the only dark force at work in the election; so was anti-intellectualism, hostility toward "elites" who claim that opinions should be based on careful study and thought.

Also, campaigning is very different from governing. This is especially true when the news media spend far more time obsessing over your opponent's [pseudo-scandals](#) than they do on all actual policy issues combined.

But now things have gotten real, and all indications are that the people in charge have no idea what they're doing, on any front.

In some ways this cluelessness may be a good thing: malevolence may indeed be tempered by incompetence. It's not just the court defeat over immigration; Republican ignorance has turned what was supposed to be a blitzkrieg against Obamacare into a quagmire, to the great benefit of millions. And Mr. Trump's [imploding job approval](#) might help slow the march to autocracy.

But meanwhile, who's in charge? Crises happen, and we have an intellectual vacuum at the top. Be afraid, be very afraid.