

May 6, 2020

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The 2020 Question: Which Candidate Will Stand Up to China?

By Matt A. Mayer

Imagine you are in your late thirties living in Ohio working at a steel or other manufacturing plant in the late 1990s. You are the second or third generation of your family working at the local plant. Perhaps even your dad is still working at the plant as a union steward. You've already seen the impact the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement had on your plant and other parts of Ohio.

Under President Bill Clinton, who you voted for and your union heavily backed, China did enough of what the experts and policymakers in Washington wanted it to do to gain entry to the World Trade Organization, which became final in December 2001. Over the next decade, you see your community and the Midwest bleed jobs as whole manufacturing plants are disassembled and moved to China where the labor is cheap. Your union is powerless to stop it. You hear story after story from family, friends, and former coworkers about China stealing American jobs and technology. Corporate America ignores all that in eagerness to make bigger and bigger profits.

Left in the wake of China's first hit on America's manufacturing might are broken families and communities whose once-vibrant Main Streets thrived with energy and activity. Store-after-store turned vacant, with only fast food restaurants and big box stores selling inexpensive stuff. You tried your best to provide for your family, but, short of leaving the only place you and they have ever called home, there just wasn't much hope or opportunity around. Life was tough.

Many people you know got hooked on [opioids](#) — something had to dull the physical and mental pain from the first hit, the second hit came with the flood of fentanyl arriving from China. Over the last decade or so, you heard about more and more people dying from opioid overdoses because the heroin they were taking started getting laced with the far more addictive and potent fentanyl. You saw friends losing their young adult children. Maybe one of your kids became a victim of this heinous poison coursing through the veins of America.

Things got so bad, federal and state governments declared an opioid overdose epidemic in 2017, with over 20,000 dying in Ohio. More than 50,000 Americans die each year, as the experts predict 500,000 more will die over the next decade. President Trump, who you voted for despite your union still backing Democrats, as part of his trade war with China, demanded China shut down the fentanyl labs producing this poison.

Now in your late fifties, you and many of your family members

and friends have managed to get back on your feet over the last couple of years thanks to strong job growth and wage increases under a President who promised to put America First. More importantly, the shale revolution and low-cost domestic energy was fundamental to the economic rebound in energy intensive sectors like manufacturing, steel mills, and petrochemical and fertilizer plants. Though President Trump's trade war with China caused some short-term issues for the farmers in your area, with the first part of the deal getting done this past January, there is excitement and energy again. Many expect some manufacturing to return to the Midwest, especially given the access to inexpensive natural gas coming out of the Utica and Marcellus Shale formations.

After nearly 20 years of decline and death, Ohio and America appear to be moving forward again. Then, the third hit from China comes crashing down with so much force it literally shuts down Ohio and America.

The arrival of the Wuhan [virus](#) results in record job losses, robs you and those you know of income, and eviscerates businesses small and large. Given it took Ohio (and Michigan) 20 years to get close to the job peak it hit in March 2000, you know the unprecedented economic shutdown will take a decade or more to recover from. Trying to figure out what 'normal' will look like going forward is next to impossible.

While you certainly don't blame Chinese Americans or the Chinese people, you find it harder and harder not to conclude that the communist Chinese government stole your job with cheap labor, killed your community with fentanyl, and destroyed the American economy with this deadly virus. America was winning again and the Chinese government couldn't accept that so it hid details about the Wuhan virus until it was too late, permitted those infected in Wuhan to board planes for the West as it prohibited them from traveling within China, and stonewalled scientists trying to find therapeutics and vaccines.

From your point of view, in the last 20 years, China has again and again essentially attacked America with its actions. It makes no sense to go to war with China, but China must be held accountable for its acts and omissions. For too long, too many politicians and corporate leaders looked the other way and hoped for the best while Main Street America got screwed. Thus, it is almost certain the 2020 presidential election for many Midwesterners will come down to which candidate and party will stop China from harming them again.

Even though he may say things your wife and daughters don't like, only one person had the backbone to fight back against China over the last 30 years: Donald Trump. If anyone can make China pay, it will be President Trump, flaws and all. America simply can't let China get away with yet another hit on this country. After the last 20 years, Main Street Americans in Ohio and throughout the Midwest know the future of America truly depends on stopping China from having the power to ever hurt us again.

The road to the White House runs through the American Midwest. That means, like him or not, Donald Trump stands a very good chance of being reelected.

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