
POLITICS

Gary Locke Is Mad About That Trump Ad

The president's latest attack ad makes a reckless claim about the former governor of Washington.

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NG HAN GUAN / REUTERS

It was getting late in the afternoon, but Gary Locke hadn't had time for breakfast or lunch. Too many emails, phone calls, and texts had been coming in from friends, family, former aides. The former Washington governor's friends were indignant. They wanted to know if he had seen President Donald Trump's campaign ad featuring him. He had. His reaction? "It's more anger," he said. He paused. He's a pretty mild guy, generally. "It's anger."

Locke endorsed Joe Biden for president last summer, but he hadn't expected to be featured in an attack ad. The Trump campaign probably never expected to feature him either. But there he is, in a brief clip included in a montage of the former vice president meeting with various Chinese officials. Locke is standing between two

Chinese flags (and next to an American one). Biden is walking toward him, with his head bowed in a way that makes him look deferential.

It's a standard theatrical move that Biden often does when he sees old political allies. And Locke *is* an old Biden ally. But he isn't Chinese. He's Chinese American. And though the photo was taken at an event in Beijing, it was taken while Locke was serving in the same administration as Biden—as the American ambassador to China. Before that, he was the first Asian American governor of a state not called Hawaii. A section of the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience in Seattle is devoted to him.

[*Read: Meet Gary Locke, America's new ambassador to China*]

In other words: Locke is not a Chinese official, as the Trump campaign made him out to be, apparently because of the way he looks and because he was standing next to a Chinese flag.

“It is racial stereotyping at its worst. Asian Americans—whether you're second-, third-, or fourth-generation, will always be viewed as foreigners,” Locke told me today. “We don't say that about second- or third-generation Irish Americans or Polish Americans. No one would even think to include them in a picture when you're talking about foreign government officials.”

Locke is justifiably bewildered by being thrown into the middle of the campaign. “For a lot of Asian Americans, it's not surprising, but it is disheartening,” he said.

[*Read: The other problematic outbreak*]

Locke's father was part of the Normandy invasion, then was ordered along with the rest of the Fifth Armored Division to the Battle of the Bulge. When Locke watched *Band of Brothers*, he says, he recognized his father's story in it. He grew up in a housing project in Seattle, and went on to a long political career that took him through the state legislature, county government, two terms as governor, three years as Barack Obama's commerce secretary and then two years as Obama's ambassador to China, from 2011 to 2013. These days, he's back home, watching the coronavirus crisis unfold in his own state and using his down time in self-isolation to build a second-story deck on his house and finish up some gardening projects. His grown kids are worried he's going to fall and break his back, like he did 20

years ago, when he was in the middle of budget negotiations with the legislature in Olympia.

One of Locke's friends has already died of COVID-19. His first campaign treasurer is in the hospital. And now he's suddenly been pulled into the presidential campaign by inadvertent cameo—which he said fits into a long history of racism against Asians in America, stretching from the Chinese Exclusion Act, to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, to the increase in anti-Asian hate crimes as the president and his allies repeatedly refer to the pandemic as the “Chinese virus.”

In a statement he scrambled to put out this afternoon, Locke said Trump was “fanning hatred.” He said with hate crimes and discrimination on the rise across the country, “the Trump team is making it worse. Asian Americans are Americans. Period.”

In what seems like both an obvious continuation of past behavior and a sign of what's to come, the Trump campaign responded by insisting that including Locke was intentional, serving a political purpose that would have been recognizable only to the president's super fans: that it was actually a subliminal nod to the conspiracy theory that Biden helped his son secure a business deal by bringing him on an official trip. (Hunter Biden did fly to China on Air Force Two and has said he did have a few business meetings while there, but aside from a brief handshake that the vice president shared with one of his son's business partners, no connection between Hunter's business dealings and his father's position has ever been shown). “The shot with the flags specifically places Biden in Beijing in 2013. It's for a reason. That's the Hunter Biden trip. Memory Lane for ol' Joe,” the Trump campaign's communications director, Tim Murtaugh, tweeted. Later, the Republican National Committee's rapid-response director defensively tweeted a screenshot of the clip that included only Biden and the Chinese flag, not Locke or the American flag that was onstage too.

Chris Lu, who became friends with Locke when they served together under Obama (Lu was the secretary of the Cabinet and, later, the deputy labor secretary), told me that his assessment of that defense was simple: “It's bullshit.”

“It's sort of comical that they think all Chinese people look alike, but more broadly, it's part of an attack on Asian Americans as others,” Lu said. And it's part of a

pattern, Lu argued. Trump has attacked a Mexican American judge as “Mexican” and concluded that the judge was therefore biased against him, and he has suggested that Colonel Alexander Vindman, the Ukrainian-born former White House national-security official who testified as part of the impeachment hearings, held dual loyalties.

Andrew Yang, the former presidential candidate, whose parents immigrated to America from Taiwan, said on Twitter: “Goddamn this shit is infuriating. Gary Locke is as American as the day is long. Trump rewriting history as if he effectively responded to the virus is utter garbage. We lost 70 days and thousands of lives due to his incompetence and disregard for what was happening overseas.”

The ad as a whole makes a confusing argument: that Biden is soft on China because of his own good relationships with Chinese President Xi Jinping and others, and that this makes him somehow culpable for decisions related to the pandemic. Trump has made overtures to Xi himself, including inviting the leader to Mar-a-Lago and having Ivanka Trump’s daughter perform a song for him in Mandarin; tweeting that they’ll “always be friends”; and taking his word on supposed efforts to contain the coronavirus—all mixed in with his trade-war rattling and posturing on currency manipulation. (The Locke appearance also isn’t the only factual problem with this ad.)

When I asked Murtaugh to explain the ad, he sent me a statement that was a slightly longer version of what he’d tweeted last night. He provided no answers to specific questions, no explanation, and no response to Locke’s concerns about stoking division, xenophobia, and potentially more hate crimes. There was certainly no apology.

“I don’t expect an apology from them,” Locke told me. “It is so characteristic of their view toward people of color.”

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