What I learned after 100,000 miles on the road talking to Trump supporters

Donald Trump's message resonates in the most forgotten corners of the US, because viewed from these places, America no longer seems a great country.

The first voter I heard mention Donald Trump’s name was a mechanic in a small town near my upstate New York home. It was days after Trump announced his run, and I was at the start of a drive across the United States.

The man, like many Trump supporters then, didn’t want his name used or his picture taken. An outraged press was loudly mocking Trump and he was embarrassed. But he...
was clear why he would vote for Trump. “There’s no American dream for anyone who isn’t a lawyer or banker,” he said. “Everyone else, we are getting a raw deal. Immigrants are taking all our jobs.”

As I pressed on, putting over 100,000 miles on my car, I heard a steady and growing crescendo of support for Trump - one that changed from embarrassment to pride.

In the early days of the election, most were like Robert McAdams, 78, of Peru, Nebraska: older whites who had dedicated their lives working in the communities where they were born. He owned a gas station, and spun a long tale of opportunities lost and grievances mostly voiced at government, many of them arcane and petty.

He was obtuse about whom to blame, other than a vague “them”, but he was emphatic about the solution: “We need to get this country straight again.”

While I was hearing a rising euphoria for Trump from many white voters, I was also hearing an equally loud and growing disbelief from the media.

Most journalists ensconced in their New York or Washington offices refused to accept that someone as louche and crass as Trump could appeal to voters. Trump supporters, in many of their minds, were simply dumb or racist, overshadowing any notion that these voters might also have some valid concerns.

As Trump started winning primaries, the outrage and disbelieve increased. I continued my drives around the US and saw a feedback develop: the loud distaste voiced against Trump by who they saw as “the establishment” only added to his appeal.

Florence Johnson, 69, was like that. She was shopping in the Goodwill in Natchitoches, Louisiana, buying a vacuum cleaner and an electrical stuffed parrot (“I have always like birds”). She wasn’t shy about her situation. “I am poor,” she said. She also wasn’t shy about her support for Trump, or why. “Hell yes I am voting for Trump. Tired of politicians. He is putting on a great show, pissing them other bastards off. They deserve it!”
Natchitoches was like many other towns with their share of enthusiastic Trump supporters. It had suffered a devastating economic downturn in the 1970s and 1980s when the cotton gin mills closed. Other than jobs related to the state university, it has since offered little opportunity. Those in town whose lives were not connected to the university lifeline were the Trump voters.

Well, the white people in town. Natchitoches, like the US, has long been divided along racial lines, with black residents confined to a lesser choice of jobs, homes, and schools. And Trump was dividing them further.

Linda Thompson, 54, was shopping in a small store down the road from Florence. She, like every minority voter I talked to, hated Trump. “I would vote for anybody but Trump. He say he ain’t racist, but sure talks that way. From my experience, them are the worst kind.”

Michael Braxton, 50, had returned to Natchitoches after a period in the military. A deeply religious man, he punctuates every sentence with “praise the lord.” “I am for Hillary. Praise the lord. Trump will probably start us another war. Praise the lord. And he is a racist. Praise the lord.”
As months went by, Trump wasn’t just exploiting and expanding white racism; he was also exposing a divide between those with good education, and those without. A version of the school room front row kids versus back row kid.

It became simple: if I wanted to talk to a community overwhelmingly supporting Trump, I would go to a white town or neighborhood nearest the rusting factory surrounded by razor fence.

If I wanted to find Clinton, or Jeb Bush, or even Rubio voters, I would go near a university, or go to the wealthier neighborhoods near tech companies, or near headquarters of global corporations.

America has changed fundamentally over the last 35 years, and I saw and heard the impact of those changes. America had finally started upending a longstanding and ugly racial hierarchy, removing legal barriers that had made the playing field anything but level. For this, minorities overwhelmingly supported the new system, despite still suffering economically and socially more than white Americans.

Yet we replaced that system with one based on schooling, building a playing field that was tilted dramatically towards anyone with the “right” education. The jobs requiring muscle decreased (many going overseas) while the jobs requiring school increased. Compounding the pain from this, we started giving the winners a much larger share of the profits.

The early Trump voters I met were the losers from these changes. Their once superior status - based only on being white - was being dismantled, while their lack of education was also being punished. They lived in towns and communities devastated by economic upheaval. They were born in them and stayed in them, despite their fall. For many, who had focused on their community over career, it felt like their entire world was collapsing.

As Trump gained momentum, as he marched towards the GOP nomination, his message started to resonate with these entire communities - including those that were doing well economically. Many solidly middle-class Americans have friends, relatives, or congregants who are suffering.

More than that, supporting Trump has become a way of showing support for their failing communities. It had become tribal: entire communities were joining the back-row kids.
This was the case in communities like Clarington, Ohio, an all-white town of less than 500 laying in a small break in the hills along the Ohio river.

Lori Ayers, 47, works in the gas station. She was blunt when I asked her about her life. “Clarington is a shithole. Jobs all left. There is nothing here anymore. When Ormet Aluminum factory closed, jobs all disappeared.” She is also blunt about the pain in her life. “I have five kids and two have addictions. There is nothing else for kids to do here but drugs. No jobs. No place to play.”

She stopped and added: “I voted for Obama the first time, not the second. Now I am voting for Trump. We just got to change things.”

I found a similar viewpoint in communities such as West Cleveland: Donna Weaver, 52, is a waitress, and has spent her entire life in her community. “I was born and raised here. I am not happy. Middle class is getting killed; we work for everything and get nothing. I hate both of the candidates, but I would vote for Trump because the Iraq war was a disaster. Why we got to keep invading countries. Time to take care of ourselves first.”

These communities are dealing with lost and changing jobs, which are no longer a sources of pride, but simply about getting by. Life for many has become a constant anxiety over upcoming bills. They are also dealing with social problems that always
follow economic loss, such as families broken apart, children struggling with little support, eroded institutions, and substance abuse - a quick salve to either forget or numb the pain.

Compounding the anxiety, and helping to morph it into humiliation, is the false national narrative that the US is a meritocracy where anyone can advance with the right education, and hence failure is because of being dumb or lazy.

But in communities I visit, the right education is often beyond most people. Many residents often fail to go beyond high school, and if they do, it is an education cobbled together by night classes and community colleges, together with a concoction of loans, programs and overwhelming debt.

All of this is humiliating and painful, and has made the perfect setting for populist politics built on blaming minorities and immigrants. And that is what Trump has exploited. He has come into these communities with white identity politics, a message that is both simple and loud: He will make America great again.

It is a message that resonates, because viewed from these places, America no longer seems a great country.