

HOW TRUMP KNUCKLES JOURNALISTS TO PARROT HIS DOCTRINE

You've likely seen some clips from Terry Moran's rather supine interview of Donald Trump.

Moran let Trump get away with a whole range of false claims uncontested. But they got into it over Trump's efforts to portray Kilmar Abrego Garcia as a bad man.

The clips don't do the exchange justice.

Trump and Moran went back and forth around 28 times, and then Trump returned to it for another six exchanges (I've included two excerpts of the fight over knuckles below).

I actually don't think this exchange reflects dementia. It certainly reflects Trump's ego. It's an instance where Moran, as credulous as he otherwise was, refused to accept Trump's chant, $2+2=5$.

Close to the beginning of the exchange, Trump held up everything – wait a minute! – when Moran refused to accept Trump's claim that the tattoos on Abrego Garcia's hands were proof of his MS-13 membership.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: On his knuckles – he had MS-13 –

TERRY MORAN: Alright. There's dis – there's a dispute over that –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Well, wait a minute. Wait a minute. He had MS-13 –

TERRY MORAN: Well –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: – on his knuckles tattooed.

TERRY MORAN: – he – he – he – it didn't say – oh, he had some tattoos that are interpreted that way. But let's

move on

After Moran insisted on something obvious: that the photo of Abrego Garcia's knuckles was clearly labeled both with interpretations of his tattoos and from that an annotation turning it into MS-13, Trump told Moran he could not state that because Trump gave him the break of a lifetime: "Terry, you can't do that -- he had -- he- hey, they're givin' you the big break of a lifetime." That is, Moran could not state the truth because Trump had granted him this access. Moran tried to move on. Trump claimed this was not an interpretation. Moran tried to move on. Finally, Moran made a half concession.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: He's got MS-13 on his knuckles.

TERRY MORAN: Alright. I --

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Okay?

TERRY MORAN: -- we'll -- we'll take a look at it --

But that was not good enough for Trump. Trump asked Moran, "Why don't you just say, 'Yes, he does,' and, you know, go on to something else --"

Minutes later, after Moran tried to move onto the Ukraine question he had been trying to get out, Trump took a question about Putin and turned it back to Moran himself.

TERRY MORAN: Do you trust [Putin]?

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I don't trust you. I don't trust -- I don't trust a lot of people. I don't trust you. Look at you. You come in all shootin' for bear. You're so happy to do the interview.

TERRY MORAN: I am happy --

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: And then you start hitting me with fake questions. You start tellin' me that a guy -- whose hand is covered with a tattoo --

TERRY MORAN: Alright. We're back to that.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: – doesn't have the tattoo, you know.

He repeated his claim that Moran is excited to have access, but then accused him of asking "fake questions," all because he refused to say 2+2=5. That's when Trump labeled Moran dishonest.

This is not dementia.

This is power.

This is precisely the purpose Trump reserves for mainstream journalists: As props in his performance of forced adherence to his reality.

And it works.

After all, Moran was willing to accept as given the last 8 years of forced doctrine, about Ukraine, about Joe Biden, about Trump's grievances. Moran has already internalized lies Trump has told for years, and wildly grotesque claims about rule of law went uncontested, unnoticed.

Moran could have stood up and walked away when Trump insisted that he repeat, 2+2=5, but instead Moran tried to make a series of half-concessions so he could move on. But even then, Trump still used it as a means to suggest he – Moran – was less trustworthy than Vladimir Putin.

It's with that background that I want to return to the other noteworthy part of this, where Moran tried to get Trump to concede that SCOTUS had ordered Trump to facilitate Abrego Garcia's return (NYT has a report that in the last week that discovery in Abrego Garcia's case had been paused, the US requested and Nayib Bukele refused to return him, as well as an even more credulous report on how Stephen Miller dreamt up this entire plan over a year in advance, both of which I'll return to).

When Terry Moran noted that Trump had the power to get Kilmar Abrego Garcia released, goading him to assert his own power, Trump complied (this was, in my opinion, the smartest thing Moran did in the interview, and it could backfire on Trump in the legal case).

TERRY MORAN: I'm not saying he's a good guy. It's about the rule of law. The order from the Supreme Court stands, sir

—

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: He came into our country illegally.

TERRY MORAN: You could get him back. There's a phone on this desk.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I could.

TERRY MORAN: You could pick it up, and with all —

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I could

TERRY MORAN: — the power of the presidency, you could call up the president of El Salvador and say, "Send him back," right now.

But then Trump shifted to the slander against Abrego Garcia — to the Administration's decision, reported by The Atlantic earlier this week, plan to impugn him rather than remedy their mistake.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: And if he were the gentleman that you say he is, I would do that.

TERRY MORAN: But the court has ordered you —

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: But he's not.

Here, several belief systems came into conflict.

At once, Moran was saying that Trump should return Abrego Garcia for two reasons, because the Supreme Court ordered he do so and because

as President he absolutely has power to do so. In response, Trump disclaimed authority for making the decision. "We have lawyers," the most powerful man in the world who appointed his defense attorneys to run DOJ said. And from there, Trump said he's just following the law *by doing whatever "the lawyers" tell him to do*, not by doing what SCOTUS tells him to do.

TERRY MORAN: – to facilitate that – his release–

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I'm not the one making this decision. We have lawyers that don't want –

TERRY MORAN: You're the president.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: – to do this, Terry –

TERRY MORAN: Yeah, but the – but the buck stops in this office –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I – no, no, no, no. I follow the law. You want me to follow the law. If I were the president that just wanted to do anything, I'd probably keep him right where he is –

TERRY MORAN: The Supreme Court says what the law is.

There have long been increasing signs – the Signal chat is a great one, and this exchange from Time Magazine's own 100 day interview is another – that Trump's not-a-lawyer Stephen Miller is both making these stupid decisions and serving as a gatekeeper to Trump.

When you and I spoke last April. Are you still committed to complying with all Supreme Court orders?

Sure, I believe in the court system.

The Supreme Court ruled 9-0 that you have to bring back Kilmar Abrego Garcia. You haven't done so. Aren't you disobeying the Supreme Court?

Well, that's not what my people told me—they didn't say it was, they said it was—the nine to nothing was something entirely different.

Let me quote from the ruling. "The order properly requires the government to facilitate Abrego Garcia's release from custody in El Salvador." Are you facilitating a release?

I leave that to my lawyers. I give them no instructions. They feel that the order said something very much different from what you're saying. But I leave that to my lawyers. If they want—and that would be the Attorney General of the United States and the people that represent the country. I don't make that decision.

Have you asked President Bukele to return him?

I haven't, uh, he said he wouldn't.

Did you ask him?

But I haven't asked him positively, but he said he wouldn't.

But if you haven't asked him, then how are you facilitating his release?

Well, because I haven't been asked to ask him by my attorneys. Nobody asked me to ask him that question, except you.

Remember, too, that Trump claimed that he didn't sign the Alien Enemies Act proclamation that, NYT describes, Stephen Miller has been concocting for over a year.

President Donald Trump on Friday downplayed his involvement in invoking the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 to deport Venezuelan migrants, saying for the first time that he hadn't signed the proclamation, even as he stood by his

administration's move.

"I don't know when it was signed, because I didn't sign it," Trump told reporters before leaving the White House on Friday evening.

The president made his comments when asked to respond to Judge James Boasberg's concerns in court on Friday that the proclamation was "signed in the dark" of night and that migrants were hurried onto planes.

"We want to get criminals out of our country, number one, and I don't know when it was signed, because I didn't sign it," Trump said. "Other people handled it, but (Secretary of State) Marco Rubio has done a great job and he wanted them out and we go along with that. We want to get criminals out of our country."

Two things are going on here, neither of them dementia.

First, Trump is either being compartmented from the most problematic decisions behind his detention program, or claiming to be. I would be unsurprised if the lawyers have compartmented him, but his public claim to CNN should be basis to claim the entire AEA declaration is invalid.

Second, Trump is enforcing a system of belief – inviting journalists in and grinding them down until they publicly adopt Trump's false claims – that justifies (in his mind) his detention program. It doesn't much matter whether Trump really believes Abrego Garcia's knuckles really say MS-13 based on false briefing from Stephen Miller or whether he's just parroting the lines Stephen Miller told him to say because he hasn't tested what Miller told him.

He did the same thing when he stated, "In Springfield, they're eating the dogs, the people

that came in. They're eating the cats," and got elected anyway. He did the same thing when he adopted Miller's false claim that Aurora had been taken over by Tren de Aragua, the fiction that *Miller was crafting last fall* to set up his use of AEA, the fiction that has been debunked by the Intelligence Committee.

It's far too late to waste time on whether Trump believes the torrent of lies he tells, to ponder whether this latest lie is a sign of dementia when his false claims about winning an election were instead calculation. Trump's utterances are always utilitarian anyway. Always.

Trump's fundamental unfitness lies in his need to and success at creating his own reality. Is Stephen Miller managing that unfitness to his own ends? Undoubtedly. But Trump's unfitness remains – the reason Miller has exploited his genius for propaganda.

Stand up, call him out for doing it, and walk away. Do not be the prop in this display of dominance.

No matter what you think the mental acuity of Donald Trump and his chief advisor is, the ABC interview yesterday displayed both roots of Trump's power, his success at bullying others into parroting his doctrine, and his use of that to claim those falsehoods legitimize something wildly divorced from American justice and rule of law.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: And you'll pick out one man, but even the man that you picked out –

TERRY MORAN: He's got –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: – he said he'd – wasn't a member of a gang. And then they looked, and –

TERRY MORAN: Alright.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: On his knuckles

– he had MS-13 –

TERRY MORAN: Alright. There's dis –
there's a dispute over that –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Well, wait a
minute. Wait a minute. He had MS-13 –

TERRY MORAN: Well –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: – on his
knuckles tattooed.

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say– oh, he had some tattoos that are
inper – interpreted that way. But let's
move on

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Wait a minute.

TERRY MORAN: I want –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Hey, Terry.
Terry. Terry.

TERRY MORAN: He – he did not have the
letter –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Don't do that –
M-S-1-3 – It says M-S-one-three.

TERRY MORAN: I – that was Photoshop. So
let me just–

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: That was
Photoshop? Terry, you can't do that – he
had –

– he– hey, they're givin' you the big
break of a lifetime. You know, you're
doin' the interview. I picked you
because – frankly I never heard of you,
but that's okay –

TERRY MORAN: This – I knew this would
come –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: But I picked you
– Terry – but you're not being very
nice. He had MS-13 tattooed –

TERRY MORAN: Alright. Alright. We'll

agree to disagree. I want to move on –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Terry.

TERRY MORAN: – to something else.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Terry. Do you want me to show the picture?

TERRY MORAN: I saw the picture. We'll – we'll – we'll agree to disagree –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Oh, and you think it was Photoshop. Well –

TERRY MORAN: Here we go. Here we go.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: – don't Photoshop it. Go look –

TERRY MORAN: Alright.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: – at his hand. He had MS-13 –

TERRY MORAN: Fair enough, he did have tattoos that can be interpreted that way. I'm not an expert on them.

I want to turn to Ukraine, sir –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: No, no. Terry –

TERRY MORAN: I– I want to get to Ukraine–

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Terry, no, no. No, no. He had MS as clear as you can be. Not "interpreted." This is why people –

TERRY MORAN: Alright.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: – no longer believe –

TERRY MORAN: Well.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: – the news, because it's fake news –

TERRY MORAN: When he was photographed in El Sal – in– in El Salvador, they aren't there. But let's just go on –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: He is –

TERRY MORAN: They aren't there when he's in El Salvador.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: –there – oh, oh, they weren't there –

TERRY MORAN: Take a look at the photograph –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: But they're there now, right?

TERRY MORAN: No. What –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: But they're there now?

TERRY MORAN: They're in your picture.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Terry.

TERRY MORAN: Ukraine, sir.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: He's got MS-13 on his knuckles.

TERRY MORAN: Alright. I –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Okay?

TERRY MORAN: – we'll – we'll take a look at it –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: It's – it's – you do such a disservice –

TERRY MORAN: We'll take a look. We'll take a look at that, sir –

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Why don't you just say, "Yes, he does," and, you know, go on to something else –

He then returned to it for another four exchanges when discomfited by Moran's questions about trusting Putin

TERRY MORAN: You think he wants peace?

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: – this is –

TERRY MORAN: You think Vladimir Putin wants peace?

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I think he does, yes. I think he does-

TERRY MORAN: Still?

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I think because of me -

TERRY MORAN: Even with the raining missiles on -

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I think he really - his - his - his dream was to take over the whole country. I think because of me, he's not gonna do that.

TERRY MORAN: Do you trust him?

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I think -

TERRY MORAN: Do you trust him?

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I don't trust you. I don't trust - I don't trust a lot of people. I don't trust you. Look at you. You come in all shootin' for bear. You're so happy to do the interview.

TERRY MORAN: I am happy -

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: And then you start hitting me with fake questions. You start tellin' me that a guy - whose hand is covered with a tattoo -

TERRY MORAN: Alright. We're back to that.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: - doesn't have the tattoo, you know.

TERRY MORAN: Alright.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I mean, you're being dishonest.

TERRY MORAN: No, I'm not -

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Let - let- let me just tell you -

TERRY MORAN: No, I am not, sir.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Do I trust – I don't trust a lot of people. But I do think this. I think that he – let's say he respects me. And I believe because of me he's not gonna take over the whole – but his decision, his choice would be to take over all of Ukraine.