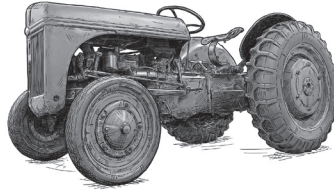


CHAPTER NINE



FARMERS WITHOUT BORDERS

It was April 26, 2017. A little before five o'clock in the afternoon. White House time.

I was the Special Assistant to the President for agriculture, and I had just helped the Secretary of Agriculture, who by that afternoon had been the Secretary for all of one day, navigate his way from the top floor of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building down into the West Wing of the White House to speak directly with President Trump. Uninvited.

Typically the Oval Office requires a reservation or, at least, call ahead seating. We did neither. Nobody had given us permission to be there. In fact, as we milled around outside the Oval waiting to, in my words to the receptionist “just get a word with the President

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about NAFTA,” I only half-expected this desperate, long-shot plan to work.

Earlier that day, National Economic Council Director Gary Cohn had informed the NEC team at one of our early morning meetings that the President was set on unilaterally terminating NAFTA before the end of the week.²¹⁸ Nobody took the news harder than me. Gary shared my frustrations. But this one seemed to be locked down. I returned to my desk from our ritualistic huddle in Gary’s office atop the second floor of the West Wing and stared at my business card. “Special Assistant to the President for Agriculture, Agriculture Trade, and Food Assistance.” My job was to represent and, in my opinion, fight for the American farmer. And that farmer had grown increasingly dependent on international trade, particularly with Canada and Mexico. Just the rumor that NAFTA would be terminated had already unsettled markets, shook the commodity trade, and made my stomach feel like it does when I see blue lights in my rear-view mirror. Even if they are coming for someone else.

I phoned the chief of staff at USDA, Heidi Green, to share the news. Ever a step ahead, she had already heard the rumor regarding termination, which I confirmed. Fortunately for American agriculture, she had also already begun thinking about how to leverage Secretary Perdue and his by then two-days-old oath of office. We had all sat in the Roosevelt Room less than twenty-four hours earlier for the first Presidential Farmer Roundtable since Reagan had met with farmers after lifting the Russian wheat embargo in 1981. I was already exhausted from the hundreds of hours of work I had poured into that event. All the goodwill earned by getting a diverse group of farmers in to see President Trump within the first one hundred days of his administration was, I feared, about to go up in smoke.

218. NAFTA is the North American Free Trade Agreement, which for over twenty years had governed the trading relationship between the United States and two of its top three agricultural trading partners.

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I do not remember precisely when the plan came into focus for Heidi and me, but it was brilliant. We would sneak the Secretary into the Oval and help him talk the President out of withdrawing from NAFTA.

That was it. That was the brilliant plan.

Cut us some slack. We had never had to secretly talk a United States President into reversing one of his major policy initiatives before. There was no playbook. No “go by.” And forget Googling it.

My contribution to this effort was to get Secretary Perdue to the Oval, and to pray a lot that this was not a complete and total disaster. I was fairly certain that I would be fired if this effort cap-sized, or even if it went well. I made this point to Gary when I called him shortly before we stored our phones in the soundproof box just outside the Oval Office suite and tucked in to make our way to the President. Gary had already completed a pretty busy day himself, having briefed in the press room on the President’s signature tax plan. To my best recollection, he was headed back to New York but was also working the phones to try to avert the unannounced NAFTA withdrawal. His words were to “go,” and he promised that he would help me find work if needed.

So. There we were. A two-term Georgia governor turned ag Secretary and a farmer’s kid from Autryville. Oh, and don’t forget Tagalong Tim. That’s Tim Murtaugh, who some two years later would depart as USDA’s communications director to join the Trump re-elect operation and ultimately rise to be the 2020 campaign communications director. I distinctly remember having to tell Tim to keep up at least twice, as his credentials were meaningless within the White House unless he was attached to the Secretary or hosted by me.

We waited patiently to just poke our heads into the Oval. All we were hoping for was a few minutes. Like we were dropping by to say hello after church on a Sunday.