

John Oliver on Trump's border wall: 'Stupider than I thought was possible'

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In the run-up to the 2016 election, John Oliver explained the destructive risks of then-candidate Trump's "build the wall" sloganeering in a Last Week Tonight segment: it was "transparently racist" as a mantra and both expensive and pointless as a policy. Four years later, Oliver returned to the subject on Sunday, because "while we predicted the whole thing would be a shamble, the extent to which that's been true even we didn't see coming."

As a candidate, Trump intended for the wall to define his presidency, "and that has very much happened", said Oliver, "but in none of the ways that he intended". And with a referendum on the Trump presidency less than three months away, Oliver explained, it's worth checking up on "the wall" – what has been built in the three and a half years since Trump took office, what damage has been done and who's doing the building.

First, the existing wall: as Oliver pointed out in 2016, finding eligible land on which to build is difficult, given the natural barriers, private property, and barriers built by the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations along the southern border. In fact, of the 275 miles of new wall constructed under the Trump administration, only five miles have been built where no barrier previously existed.

But the "replacement wall" is hardly comparable to the old barrier. Oliver compared photos of a case study in Arizona: the pre-existing barrier resembled a simple farm fence, which was replaced by a 30-foot tall barrier of steel slats – a design selected by the Trump administration after a prototype parade in the desert that Oliver derisively called a "wall beauty contest".

The photos demonstrated that calling the two barriers basically the same is "like claiming John Cena and I are the same because we're the exact same age and we're both named John", Oliver said. "Sure, yeah, on paper there are some similarities, but when you compare the two side-by-side, one is gigantic and the other looks like it might collapse if you press it too hard."

The new, 30ft wall has disrupted animal migratory patterns and sliced up people's land, "and the thing is, for what?" Oliver asked. "If this is about stopping drugs or people from entering the country, it's worth remembering that most of that happens through our ports of entry."

The Department of Homeland Security's inspector general issued a report last month blasting the administration for not using a "sound methodology" in prioritizing

investments along the border. In other words, said Oliver, “putting walls where we’ve been putting them just doesn’t make sense”. And that insanity costs money – “Mexico obviously is not paying for the wall,” said Oliver. “Instead, we are, and in the dumbest possible way.”

Only \$5bn of the \$15bn demanded by Trump for the wall was approved by Congress; to access the other \$10bn, Trump declared a national emergency and tapped Pentagon construction funds meant to go to, among many other things, expansion of an overcrowded middle school on an army base in Kentucky and critical repairs for a military daycare.

Nevertheless, the administration has continued to dole out massive contracts to wall-building construction firms, with the egregious example of North Dakota-based Fisher Sand & Gravel, whom Trump allegedly liked because the company’s owner, Tommy Fisher, frequently appeared on Fox News. Which makes sense, said Oliver – “Trump’s like a shut-in who sits at home all day and orders what he sees on Fox commercials. But instead of ordering LegendsXL male enhancement pills, he picks companies to build a giant wall across the southern border.”

Fisher Sand & Gravel had some serious red flags: a federal lawsuit for sex discrimination, tax fraud charges, over 2,000 complaints from local, state and federal regulatory bodies, and 469 criminal charges for one asphalt plant in Phoenix.

Furthermore, Fisher Sand & Gravel linked up with a sketchy nonprofit called We Build The Wall – the same nonprofit which led to the arrest last week of former Trump adviser Steve Bannon, who prosecutors allege skimmed over \$1m from the group.

But about \$10m of the group’s supposed \$25m crowdsourced haul went to Tommy Fisher’s company, which has built sections of wall on private property in New Mexico and along the Rio Grande in Texas that are already loose and likely to topple due to soil erosion, according to a ProPublica investigation.

“Fisher Sand & Gravel is a company with a checkered past, that partnered with a shady nonprofit whose backers are now under indictment for skimming money for their own use, in order to have a foreman who’s not an actual foreman help build a wall that looks like it’s going to collapse or get pushed over,” Oliver summarized. “And if you know anything about this administration, it will not surprise you to learn that Fisher has now wound up with over \$2bn in border-building contracts.”

Should Trump be re-elected, this stupidity “is only going to accelerate”, said Oliver, noting that this is already happening; the administration has attempted to take private land by filing more eminent domain lawsuits during the pandemic than during any other time in his presidency, and has invoked a provision in a 2005 law to waive all legal requirements for construction, thus ignoring environmental regulations and or cultural heritage protections.

The devastation was predictable, said Oliver – “I know that, because we literally predicted it, but even I didn’t see some of this coming.” From the wall beauty contest to personalized bricks sold by Bannon’s scam charity, “all of this was stupider than I thought was possible.”

“Because the fact is: this wall is not a functional barrier. If anything, it’s a fucking monument to Trump,” Oliver concluded. “And there’s perhaps nothing more emblematic of his presidency than this wall -- it’s destructive, pointless, ineffective, racist, weak and something that the damages of which we’re going to have to be dealing with for a very long time.”