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MONEY POLITICS

The controversy around Trump's fast-food football feast, explained

People are calling Trump's McDonald's and Wendy's meal for the Clemson Tigers racist and classist.

By Rebecca Jennings | @rebexxxa | Updated Jan 30, 2019, 4:23pm EST



Trump presenting a buffet of fast food to be served to the Clemson Tigers football team. | Chris Kleponis/Pool/Getty Images

Since joining Vox in 2018, her work has explored the rise of TikTok, internet aesthetics, and the pursuit of money and fame online. You can sign up for her biweekly Vox Culture newsletter here.

When President Trump welcomed the Clemson Tigers, national college football champions, to the White House on January 14, he served them burgers, pizza, and fries from some of America's most storied institutions: fast-food chains.

The resulting buffet, which included hamburgers, fries, salads, and fish sandwiches from McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's alongside Domino's pizza, was a strange choice, particularly for an event held in the 140-seat State Dining Room, which traditionally hosts formal dinners for ambassadors and heads of state.

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But it was also a choice that Trump and the White House blamed on the **partial government shutdown**, the **longest in US history**. Like many other federal institutions, the White House kitchen was not operating at the time, partly a result of Trump's refusal to support a bill that doesn't include funding for a \$5 billion wall on the Mexican border.

In an explanation for the evening's menu, White House press secretary **Sarah Huckabee Sanders tweeted**, "The Democrats' refusal to compromise on border security and reopen the government didn't stop President Trump from hosting national champion **@ClemsonFB** tonight. He personally paid for the event to be catered by some of America's great fast food joints."

Though he told reporters that he had personally bought "300 hamburgers," in a tweet the next morning that number had skyrocketed to "1000 hamberders [sic]." (Photos and videos of the scene show that the lower number is likely the more correct one.)



Not found

Great being with the National Champion Clemson Tigers last night at the White House. Because of the Shutdown I served them massive amounts of Fast Food (I paid), over 1000 hamberders etc. Within one hour, it was all gone. Great guys and big eaters!

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) January 15, 2019

But though this provides a clear, if a bit insignificant, portrait of **the ease at which Trump is capable of lying**, others have accused Trump of **disrespecting the athletes** by serving them cheap fast food. Some **have also argued** that the right thing to do would have been to bring in his kitchen staff at the Trump International Hotel, which is just three blocks from the White House.

There were, of course, the sorts of viral tweets that one would expect on such an occasion. **One poked fun** at the juxtaposition of presumably hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of silver and china "holding \$29.50 of lukewarm dog shit," **another called it** "probably the best metaphor for Trump's presidency that I can think of." A third **likened the move to something that** *Talladega Nights*' Ricky Bobby would do, comparing Trump to the wealthy yet unsophisticated protagonist.

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Here's a video I shot of President Trump showing off his 300 hamburgers.

pic.twitter.com/P06S6I5w07

— Hunter Walker (@hunterw) January 14, 2019

At least some of the guests, for their part, seem to have **appreciated the dinner choice**; Clemson quarterback Trevor Lawrence **told TMZ** that "It was awesome." Trump himself has also long professed to be a fan of fast food, **possibly out of a fear of being poisoned**, so it's likely that he enjoyed the meal just fine.

For some, Trump's comments, particularly when he **speculated to reporters prior to**

the event that “I would think that’s their favorite food,” referring to chains like McDonald’s and Wendy’s, **rang as classist or racist**. It’s not much of a leap to assume that Trump guessed that many Clemson Tigers are black or come from working-class backgrounds, and thus presumed they prefer cheap, fatty foods over anything the White House would typically serve for guests in the State Dining Room.

This is a false assumption — **studies show that people actually eat more fast food as their income levels rise**, and about one-third of all US adults **eat fast food on a given day** — but it’s still a widespread one, and one that contributes to further stereotypes about black and poor people’s consumption habits being somehow less virtuous than rich people’s.

Yet as one **person on Twitter pointed out**, it wouldn’t be difficult to imagine a different president, perhaps one with less of a **history of racism**, buying a bunch of fast food for a college football team and coming across as “fun” or “accessible.”

To suggest that there’s something wrong with eating fast food at all is its own **ethical conundrum** — on the one hand, as Vox’s **David Roberts notes**, America’s largest fast-food corporations are predicated on “a vast network of animal suffering and ecological destruction and has in turn produced an epidemic of ill health.”

There is a difference, however, between criticizing the industry that makes fast food inescapable and proclaiming one’s own moral superiority over those who eat it (which is to say, most of us). No, there’s nothing wrong with college athletes, or the president, or anyone, really, eating fast food if they want to. But Trump’s comments that presume college athletes, who likely take great care of their bodies, would prefer a cheap buffet of burgers and fries over the kinds of food that one would expect to be served during a White House visit, have raised concern for some.

Yet most of Clemson’s black players didn’t even attend the event. A **report by The Root revealed that** three-fourths of the team’s black players remained in South Carolina rather than make the trek to DC, with three of them confirming that Trump was the reason why. “When asked if they regretted their decision to stay in South Carolina once they saw the piles of cold McMeat their teammates got to enjoy, all three laughed,” writes Michael Harriot. “‘Now if it was some Five Guys, I might feel different,’ responded one.”

Burger King, meanwhile, has responded in its typical “relatable brand” voice on Twitter.



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due to a large order placed yesterday, we're all out of hamberders.
just serving hamburgers today.

11:33 AM · Jan 15, 2019

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