

Lunch with the FT Life & Arts

Former US trade chief Robert Lighthizer: 'Economists have been wrong on everything!'

The architect of Trump's first-term tariff policy on the end of free trade, swapping the White House for Wall Street — and why he considers the president 'the most honest person'

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Robert Lighthizer is a name that strikes fear into the hearts of diplomats. Plenty of seasoned foreign officials shudder as they recall bruising negotiations with Washington's fearsome tariff zealot.

Lighthizer — known as Bob to his friends — was the US trade representative in Trump's first-term cabinet. He went about the job, traditionally one of the more sedate, like nobody else. With his boss's blessing, Lighthizer lit a fire under the global trading order — renegotiating US trade deals, attacking China and Europe with huge tariffs and railing against the World Trade Organization.

If it sounds familiar, it's because Trump's second term is the more intense second act to his first — at least as far as trade policy goes. But one character is missing: Lighthizer. Despite the fears of many trade diplomats in Washington, who swiftly convened crisis meetings when Trump won the election in November, Lighthizer fell by the wayside as Trump's palace games unfolded over the winter months.

"The president still calls me up from time to time," he says, when we meet in Washington's popular Cafe Milano. But he insists that he did not want to return — at least, not in his former role. "There's only one job worth doing twice, and the president has it."

I had hoped to meet Lighthizer for lunch in Palm Beach, the seat of the modern-day MAGA movement, where he has a waterfront condo. I imagined dining a stone's throw from the pink towers of Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort. But Lighthizer only spends time there during the winter. Mostly, he's in Washington. Sometimes he's in Chestertown, on the Maryland shore, where he hangs out with his son and his grandchildren, who live in New York. His daughter, with whom he is close, lives in a Washington suburb.

Milano, set just off a busy shopping street in the well-heeled Georgetown neighbourhood, has been a frequent hang-out for presidents and politicians for decades, and Trumpworld characters are not immune to the lure.

When I arrive, 10 minutes early, Lighthizer is already seated with a Diet Coke. Although dressed in a plain dark suit and white shirt, he is fresh from a game of golf, which he later tells me went extremely badly.

We are meeting just days after the fatal shooting of the conservative activist Charlie Kirk in Utah. The topic of political division quickly comes up, but Lighthizer carefully avoids saying too much on the shooting itself.

Trump derangement syndrome is a really, really weird thing. I don't get it. A lot of people really hated Roosevelt, but nobody thought he was the devil

What he will say, though, is that he dislikes what he terms "Trump derangement syndrome". "It's a really, really weird thing," he says. "I don't get it." Such hatred, he offers, blurs people's thinking. "A lot of people really hated Roosevelt, but nobody thought Roosevelt was the devil."

A politician such as Donald Trump, with his desire to topple the establishment way of things, is something of a gift to Lighthizer. Energetic in his late seventies, he remains a proselytiser against what he sees as the global ills of unadulterated free trade.

"I really like him as a person," he says, simply. "I like people with an edge, outspoken with an edge, and he's done very bold things in my area. So I'm grateful to him, but I legitimately like him."

We're served triangle slices of thin focaccia bread and fresh chopped tomatoes. The tomatoes, in particular, are delicious.

"People will say — 'well, he's a liar'," he continues. "And I say, 'No, you don't understand. He's incapable of a lie.' He's, like, the most honest person between thought and voice that ever lived. He just doesn't have any devious side to him at all. He can't do it." Here, Lighthizer is at odds with the armies of fact-checkers deployed by American news organisations to uncover false claims in Trump's speeches.

A smiling waiter hovers, hoping to take our order. I've not yet looked at the menu. To speed things along, I ask my companion what he thinks is a good choice, given his status as a regular around here.

If it were dinner time, he says, we should each choose a plate of pasta and split them half and half. "And we'd end up with wine too, of course!" But as it's lunchtime, he will settle for just antipasti. "Or I would get a salad. But I'm not really a big eating-a-salad-as-a-main-course person."

Before I can say a word, he's pivoted to a pizza. "But no wine?" I ask. "I'm not a wine-during-the-day person," he says, sounding resigned, before swiftly reversing course and agreeing to join me in a glass ("I don't want you going home feeling deprived").

Lighthizer grew up in Ashtabula, a city in north-east Ohio, about one hour's drive from Cleveland. He moved to Washington to attend Georgetown University, before working on Capitol Hill for the former Republican Senator Bob Dole after a stint at a Washington law firm in the early 1970s. Some years after that, he became a senior trade official in the administration of Ronald Reagan, then went back into a law firm for more than three decades before being tapped by Trump.

I read an old Washington Post profile from 1987 that said he had given up coffee, tea and all forms of tobacco. Young Lighthizer, then a swashbuckling tax lawyer in his thirties, would instead rise at the crack of dawn to lift weights.

"Yes, I just used to drink cups of hot water," Lighthizer says. "I once didn't drink for seven months . . . And I quit for five years in my late twenties and early thirties. When I was in the administration, I didn't drink in 2019 for six months.

"I like to give things up. I'll go at least one day a week without eating . . . well. I'll have a glass of Scotch at night." It sounds a little ascetic. Why do this, I ask. He shrugs. "Why not? I don't know. Just to show you can?"

We place our pizza orders. A Calabrese for me, and a Cafe Milano for him. He orders a glass of Chianti (which I follow), and asks for a sharp knife for his pizza. He's on friendly terms with the serving staff. "I know the night crowd here much better," he tells me.

The Overton window has shifted our way so much that what was unthinkable eight years ago is like, 'OK, fine'

Lighthizer's diagnosis of the US's trade woes is nowadays almost part of Washington establishment thinking. By his account, and because of what he calls a "foolish devotion to the theology of free trade", companies have for too many decades been rewarded for moving their manufacturing overseas to take advantage of cheaper labour, among other

things.

This accelerated in the early 2000s, when China joined the World Trade Organization and benefited from access to the global market. The US now buys and imports a lot more than it makes — a fact that unsettles Lighthizer. This US trade deficit, he says, is nothing more than a transfer of wealth from Americans to foreign countries. (Many economists blame macroeconomic factors rather than trade policy for the deficit. These include a combination of lower savings in the US, the dollar's status as a safe-haven asset and capital flows into the US by foreign countries.)

He has a professed devotion to boosting the job prospects of Americans without college degrees, and a vitriol for the chief executives who moved their jobs to China just to make more money ("I don't forgive any of them!").

So what does he make of the trade wars of Trump 2.0? In his nine months in the White House, the US president has unleashed a tidal wave of new tariffs on the world's trading system. He has gone faster and bigger than he did during his first term, spooking global stock markets with his assortment of tariffs. He has railed against the world for "ripping off" Americans. He's slapped levies on US imports of cars and metals, boosted tariffs on small packages from around the world and threatened to hit chips, drugs and critical minerals with even more tariffs.

"I think there's a really, really, really serious problem with these massive trade deficits. It's hurting the country in a lot of ways, and so something has to be done, and the objective is for more trade to be balanced," Lighthizer says, delivering words he has practised thousands of times.

OK, but what about the argument that these tariffs will push up prices for ordinary Americans and ultimately drive inflation? "Our prices are too high, but they haven't gone up that much under Trump," he replies. Not yet, I say. He gets animated. These economists, he says, and their "studies", are "all malarkey! . . . It's like they're the College of Cardinals, you know, interpreting the virgin birth! Economists have been wrong on everything!"

Menu

Cafe Milano

3251 Prospect St NW, Washington, DC
20007

Diet Coke x2 \$12

Focaccia \$19

Glass of Chianti x2 \$38

Calabrese pizza \$28

Cafe Milano pizza \$27

Complimentary chocolates and Italian
biscuits

Total (inc tax and service) \$162.40

"First of all, they've predicted 10 of the last two recessions, they've talked about all the inflation.

None of these things have happened! At some point, they have to get some humility."

I keep pressing. What if we accept that Trump's tariffs will prompt companies to move their supply chains and these new manufacturing jobs will appear in the US — can this happen during Trump's term?

Isn't there a political cost to the president if his tariffs push up prices and these jobs are slower to materialise?

Yes, it might take a while, Lighthizer admits. "But that's not a reason not to do it." No Democrat will campaign for free trade again, he argues. "If there's evidence of green shoots and the process working, no one's going to run on the other side of it. And certainly, if you get the Republicans winning the next election, then you've got a new trade system."

Our pizzas have arrived, and are quite good. I notice I'm eating mine a little faster than Lighthizer, in part because I've got him railing against the "libertarian approach" to trade. "What is there in your life that you know well, that doing nothing is the answer to a problem?" he asks. "We can't be in a position where the top 1 per cent gets geometrically richer, and the 50th percentile person moves up by 2 or 3 per cent, you know?"

Last time around, Trump offered a lot of carve-outs to the tariffs. Companies had to make their case to Lighthizer and his staff through a broad, bureaucratic process — one that involved paperwork. There's nothing like that this time around. Critics say the ad hoc approach and chaotic, opaque policymaking mean that big companies simply send their CEO into the Oval Office to beg the president for mercy.

In my opinion, the notion that you can have a deal that solves the problem between the United States and China is absurd

“I don't think you could have gotten away with what they're doing now, eight years ago,” Lighthizer says. “You know, Trump has a bigger mandate. He has more control over Congress. And the Overton window has shifted our way so much that what was unthinkable eight years ago is like, ‘OK, fine. We understand the problem.’”

Trump has already gone through a tariff rollercoaster with China. Lighthizer led talks last time that ultimately resulted in what was dubbed a “phase one” trade deal. Where does he think things are headed this time? “There was never going to be a phase two,” he says firmly. “I mean, in my opinion, the notion that you can have a deal that solves the problem between the United States and China is absurd. The whole notion of communism is to take over the world.”

One of the things that really bothers him, he tells me, is the reliance of American defence companies on China for essential parts. “They've been doing this for a generation,” he says, getting worked up again. “And the only reason they did it was so the CEO would make more money. I mean, it's so unserious and scary, I'm hiring you to defend me. And you said, ‘OK, fine, I'm going to go to your geopolitical adversary and be dependent on them to defend you from them!’”

At one point during this heated part of the lunch, Lighthizer is stopped in his tracks. “Aren't those shorts too short?” he says, incredulously. “Look up to your left, unbelievable.” I turn to see a young woman, I would guess in her late teens, wearing — admittedly — some extremely short denim shorts. “At least the girl is very young, but they have parents, presumably. When they walk out the door, the parents should say — ‘hey!’ But anyway.”

I ask about his children (“Good conservatives, both of them.”) and whether they would listen to him if he tried to tell them what to wear. “Oh, I would have a discussion!” he says. “But growing up it would never occur to them to do that! Nor would it occur to you! You would never do it!”

In an era of division and intense polarisation, tariffs have enjoyed an unusual amount of support from both Democrats and Republicans. Former president Joe Biden's top trade adviser, Katherine Tai, maintained many of Trump's first-term tariffs.

Lighthizer himself sometimes sounds like he could be a Democrat. "I'm against income inequality," he says at one point. What makes you different from a moderate Democrat, I ask? "I'm not leftwing at all. I'm conservative," he replies, surprised by the question. But you're talking about wealth inequality, and working-class people getting the same shot in life as wealthy people, I say. "That's just patriotism," he counters. "That's economic nationalism."

I'm an anti-Wall Street person. But what I do is I go around and I tell them why I think what I think

Nowadays, he acts as an adviser for Citigroup, the Wall Street bank. "I don't lobby or anything like that," he tells me. I say that I was surprised to see him go and work for a bank. At first defensive, he quickly relaxes. "Well, that's fair, I'm not a Wall Street person," he says. "I'm an anti-Wall Street person. But what I do is I go around and I tell them

why I think what I think." Giving speeches also keeps him busy. His travels this year have already taken in Singapore, Dubai, Mexico City, London (several times), Paris (a couple of times), Stockholm, Oslo . . . "and then a lot of Miami and New York and LA".

Our pizzas finished, we're offered coffee and brought a small plate of chocolates and Italian biscuits. "The lady will pay!" he declares to a passing waiter, clearly tickled by the idea. He takes a selfie of us on his phone. "My daughter says 'pictures or it didn't happen!'" He spends some time waxing lyrical about how happy children make him — people should have them, they're wonderful! But yes, he says, of course, it's a personal decision.

We file out onto the sunny Georgetown street. "This is my hood," says Lighthizer, gesturing around and beaming. As we walk to the corner, I mention that I often go kayaking on the Potomac. He sounds excited, he wants to know where he can find a kayak. "Not one of those ones you sit inside," he says, "that won't work at my age, I need one to sit on top." I suggest a few places. He listens intently, and we part ways at the corner. He has a shop he needs to visit. I will not be surprised to find him charging down the Potomac one day soon.

Aime Williams is the FT's US trade correspondent

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Robert Lighthizer