

WAR



BOB
WOODWARD

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For my lifelong friend and reporting partner Carl Bernstein

“Mechanical and scientific creations of modern man tend to conceal from him the nature of his own humanity and to encourage him in all sorts of Promethean ambitions and illusions.”

George Kennan, American diplomat and the father of the policy of containment theory that the U.S. firmly block the expansion of the Soviet Union

Author's Personal Note

"I'm going to keep going," Claire McMullen, my remarkable full-time assistant on this book, tells me all the time. Going to keep going is her motto.

A brilliant, gifted writer and lawyer from Australia, Claire, 30, made this book possible. Without her, there would be no book. Period. She is a genius. Always good-natured and joyful, Claire is also tough. She challenges me to pursue the hard stories, confirmation and evidence. Her push is kind but never-ending. She regularly reminds me of the new reporting paths that must be explored. She may understand these wars in Ukraine and the Middle East better and more than I do. She knows our files, the public record, and is always connecting them. When my energy stalls out, she shows up early, stays late and comes in weekends. She is always thinking. Never stumped. Claire manages the hundreds of files and interview transcripts which she makes personally with marathon speed and accuracy.

I many times think, Why am I not more like her? The honest answer is that there is only one Claire McMullen. She will write her own books soon. Her contribution to this one cannot be overstated. With affection, friendship and overwhelming admiration.

Prologue

One evening in February 1989, my Watergate reporting partner Carl Bernstein bumped into Donald Trump at a dinner party in New York City.

“Why don’t you come on up,” Carl urged me on the phone from the party, hosted by Ahmet Ertegun, the Turkish American socialite and record executive, in his Upper East Side townhouse. “Everybody’s having a good time,” he said. “Trump is here. It’s really interesting. I’ve been talking to him.”

Bernstein was fascinated with Trump’s book, *The Art of the Deal*. Somewhat reluctantly I agreed to join him, in large part, as Carl often reminds me, because I needed the key to his apartment where I was staying at the time.

“I’ll be there soon,” I told him.

It had been 17 years since Carl and I first collaborated on stories about the Watergate burglary, June 17, 1972.

Trump took a look at us standing together, then age 45, and he came over. “Wouldn’t it be amazing if Woodward & Bernstein interviewed Donald Trump?” he said.

Carl and I looked at each other.

“Sure,” Carl said. “How about tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Trump said. “Come to my office at Trump Tower.”

“This guy is interesting,” Carl assured me after Trump was gone.

“But not in politics,” I said.

I was immediately intrigued by Trump, a hustler entrepreneur and his unique, carefully nurtured and cultivated persona, designed even then to

manipulate others with precision and a touch of ruthlessness.

The Trump interview, taped on a microcassette and transcribed with a typewriter, was deposited into a manila envelope with a copy of Trump's book and eventually lost in piles and piles of records, interview notes and news clippings. I am a pack rat. For over thirty years, Carl and I looked for it.

I joked with President Trump about "the lost interview" when I interviewed him in the Oval Office in December 2019 for the second of my three books on his presidency, *Rage*.

"We sat at a table and we talked," Trump recalled. "I remember it well." He said I should try to find it because he believed it was a great interview.

Last year, 2023, I went to a facility where my records are stored and sifted through hundreds of boxes of old files. In a box of miscellaneous news clippings from the 1980s, I noticed a plain, slightly battered envelope—the interview.

It's a portrait of the young Trump at age 42, focused exclusively on his real estate deals, on making money and his celebrity status. But he was hazy about his future.

"I'm really looking to make the greatest hotel," Trump told us in 1989. "That's why I'm doing suites on top. I'm building great suites.

"You ask me where I'm going and I don't think I could tell you at all," Trump said. "If everything stayed the way it is right now I could probably tell you pretty well where I'm going to be." But, he emphasized, "The world changes." He believed that was the only certainty.

He also spoke about how he behaved differently depending on who he was with. "If I'm with fellas—meaning contractors and this and that—I react one way," Trump said and then gestured to us. "If I know I have the two pros of all time sitting there with me, with tape recorders on, you naturally act differently.

"Much more interesting would be the real act as opposed to the façade," Trump said about himself. I wondered about "the real act."

"It's much more interesting. It's an act that hasn't been caught," Trump added.

He was constantly performing and, that day, we were the recipients of his full-on charm offensive.

“It’s never the same when there’s somebody sitting with you and literally taking notes. You know, you’re on your good behavior, and frankly, it’s not nearly as interesting as the real screaming shouting.”

Trump also appeared preoccupied with looking tough, strong.

“The worst part about the television stuff when we do it is they put the makeup all over you,” Trump said. “This morning I did something and they put the makeup all over your face and so do you go up and take a shower and clean it off or do you leave it? And in the construction business you don’t wear makeup. You got problems if you wear makeup.”

We asked Trump to take us through the steps of one of his real estate deals. How are they done?

“Instinctively,” he said immediately. “I cannot tell you what it is, you understand. Because instinct is far more important than any other ingredient if you have the right instincts. And the worst deals I’ve made have been deals where I didn’t follow my instinct. The best deals I’ve made have been deals where I followed my instinct and wouldn’t listen to all of the people that said, ‘there’s no way it works.’

“Very few people have proper instincts,” he said. “But I’ve seen people with proper instincts do things that other people just can’t do.”

Is there a master plan?

“I don’t think I could define what the great master plan is,” he said referring to his life. “You understand that. But it somehow fits together in an instinctual way. I’ll tell you what, if you find out let me know. I’d be interested. I might be actually interested.”

I asked about his social conscience. Could it “lead you into politics or some public role?”

“Well, you know, to me it’s all very interesting,” he said. “The other week I was watching a boxing match in Atlantic City and these are rough guys, you know, physically rough guys. And mentally tough in a sense, okay. I mean they’re not going to write books but mentally tough in a certain sense.

“And the champion lost and he was defeated by somebody who’s a very good fighter but who wasn’t expected to win. And they interviewed the boxer after the match and they said, ‘How’d you do this? How’d you win?’

“And he said, ‘I just went with the punches, man. I just went with the punches.’ I thought it was a great expression,” Trump said, “because it’s about life just as much as it is about boxing or anything else. You go with the punches.”

To look back over Trump’s life now—his real estate deals, his presidency, impeachments, investigations, civil and criminal trials, a conviction, attempted assassination, campaign for re-election—it is exactly what he has done. Roll with the punches.

“Anybody that says where they’re going to be in ten years is a schmuck,” Trump added. “The world changes. You’ll have depressions. You’ll have recessions. You’ll have upswings. You’ll have downswings. You’ll have wars. Things that are beyond your control or in most cases beyond people’s control. So you really do have to go with the punches and it’s bad to predict too far out in advance, you know, where you’re going to be.”

At the time he was almost obsessed with critical news headlines about him losing deals.

“You make more money as a seller than you do as a buyer,” Trump explained. “I found that to be a seller today is to be a loser. Psychologically. And that’s wrong.

“I’ll tell you what. I beat the shit out of a guy named Merv Griffin,” Trump said. Griffin was a television talk show host and media mogul. “Just beat him. And, you know, he came in—you talk about makeup. He came in with makeup and he was on television, you know, he comes into my office. He made a deal to buy everything I didn’t want in Resorts International,” Trump said. “I kept telling him no, no, no, no, and he kept raising the price, raising the price, raising the price. All of a sudden, it turns out to be an incredible deal for me. An unbelievable deal.

“Plus,” Trump added, “I got the Taj Mahal, which is the absolute crown jewel of the world.” He was referring to the Taj Mahal Atlantic City casino,

not the sacred mausoleum in India.

“The point is that people thought I lost,” he said. “So what’s happened is there’s a mood in the world for the last five years that if you’re a seller, you’re a loser, even if you’re a seller at a huge profit.”

I asked Trump, When you get up in the morning, what do you read? Who do you talk to? What information sources do you trust?

“Much of it is very basic,” Trump said. “I read *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. I read the *Post* and the *News*, not so much for business, just to sort of I live in the city and you know, it’s reporting on the city.” The *New York Post* was a tabloid that covered Trump almost obsessively.

“I rely less on people than I do just this general flow of information,” he said. “I also speak to cab drivers. I go to cities and say what do you think of this? That’s how I bought Mar-a-Lago. Talking to a cab driver, and asking him: ‘What’s hot in Florida? What’s the greatest house in Palm Beach?’

“Oh, the greatest house is Mar-a-Lago,” the cab driver said.

“I said where is it? Take me over.” Trump then added, “I was in Palm Beach, I was in the Breakers and I was bored stiff.”

Trump eventually bought Mar-a-Lago for \$7 million.

“I talk to anybody,” he said. “I always call it my poll. People jokingly tell me you know that Trump will speak with anybody. And I do, I speak to the construction workers and the cab drivers, and those are the people I get along with best anyway in many respects. I speak to everybody.”

Trump claimed he bought 9.9 percent of a casino company, Bally Manufacturing, and in a short period of time made \$32 million. He then said he spent “close to 100 million on buying stock” in Bally which led to a lawsuit against him. The lawyers for the other side wanted Trump’s records.

“They were trying to prove that I did this tremendous research on the company, that I spent weeks and months analyzing the company,” Trump said. “And they figured I’d have files that would be up to the ceiling. So they subpoenaed everything and I ended up giving them no papers. There were virtually no files. So I’m being grilled by one of their high-priced lawyers.”

Trump impersonated the lawyer: “How long did you know about this, Mr. Trump? And when?”

“In other words, they’re trying to say like this is this great plot,” Trump said. “I said, I don’t know, I just started thinking about it the day I bought it.”

The lawyer was incredulous. “Well, how many reports did you do?”

“Well, I really didn’t, I just had a feeling.”

“They didn’t believe that somebody would take 100 million bucks and put it into a company with no real research,” Trump said. “Now I had research in my head, but beyond that, you know, they just had not thought that happens. And the corporate mind and the corporate mentality doesn’t think that happens. Those are my best deals.”

Carl asked Trump if he ever sees himself in a public service role?

“I don’t think so but I’m not sure,” Trump said. “I’m young. In theory, statistically, I have a long time left. I’ve seen people give so much away that they don’t have anything when bad times come.”

He said he was setting up a Donald J. Trump Foundation. “When I kick the bucket—as the expression goes—I want to leave a tremendous amount of money to that foundation. Some to my family and some to the foundation. You have an obligation to your family.”

Trump spoke about “bad times” as if they were inevitable. “I always like to sort of prepare for the worst. And it doesn’t sound like a very particularly nice statement,” he said. “I know times will get bad. It’s just a question when.”

He brought up his private 282-foot yacht that he bought from the wealthy Saudi businessman and arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi. Trump had renamed it *Trump Princess*. “To build new today would cost 150 to 200 million dollars. If you guys want we’ll go on it or something.... It’s phenomenal. If

you read *Time* magazine I do nothing but float around on this boat all day long. It's not the way it is."

Who is your best friend? I asked.

He listed some names of businessmen and investors, people who worked for him, that neither Carl nor I recognized, and his brother Robert. "I guess in all cases business related," he said. "Only because that's the people I deal with.

"But friendship is a strange thing. You know, I'm always concerned with friendship. Sometimes you like to test people; right now everybody wants to be my friend for whatever reason. Okay for the obvious reasons.

"Sometimes you'd like to test and say one day just for a period of a week that Trump blew it, and then go back and call 'em up and invite 'em for dinner and see whether they show up. I've often wanted to do that. Take a period of a month and let the world think that I blew it just to test whether or not in fact the friends were friends.

"I'm a great loyalist. I believe in loyalty to people. I believe in having great friends and great enemies. I've seen people who were on top who didn't stay on top and all of a sudden... the same people who were kissing their ass are gone. I mean like gone.

"One example was a banker. He was really a great banker, for one of the big banks—Citibank. And he was in charge of huge loans to very substantial people.

"He made a lot of people rich loaning money and he called me like two years after the fact. He said, you know, it's incredible, the same people that were my best friends, that were calling me up all the time and kissing my ass in every way, I can't even get through to 'em on the telephone anymore.... When he left the bank they wouldn't take his calls anymore.

"I would."

Trump described his strategy of refusing to pay the property violations he received from inspectors until they disappeared or forgot about them.

“From day one, I said fuck them,” Trump said of the inspectors.

“When I was in Brooklyn, inspectors would come around and they’d give me a violation on buildings that were absolutely perfect,” Trump recalled. “I’d say, ‘fuck you.’ And they’d give me more violations. And more. And for one month it was miserable. I had more violations—and they were unfounded violations. But they give it because what they wanted was if you ever paid ’em off they’d always come back. So what happened to me, in one month they just said, ‘fuck this guy, he’s a piece of shit.’ And they’d go to somebody else.

“The point is if you fold it causes you much more trouble than it’s worth,” Trump said.

“You can say the same thing with the mob. If you agree to do business with them, they’ll always come back. If you tell ’em to go fuck themselves—in that case, perhaps in a nicer way. But if you tell them ‘forget it man, forget it, nothing’s worth it,’ they might try and put pressure on you at the beginning but in the end they’re going to find an easier mark because it’s too tough for them. Inspectors. Mobs. Unions. Okay?”

This was Trump’s basic philosophy.

Carl asked, who are your greatest enemies?

“Well, I hate to say because then you’re just going to go and interview ’em. I hate playing the role of a critic.”

Trump in fact loved it. “The obvious one is Ed Koch,” he said. “Ed Koch was the worst mayor in the history of New York City.”

Thirty-five years later, Trump still criticizes opponents with the same exaggerated effect. “Joe Biden is the worst president in the history of the United States,” he said after President Biden announced in July 2024 that he would not be seeking re-election.

Even in 1989, Trump's character was focused on winning, fighting and surviving. "And the only way you do that," he said, "is instinct.

"If people know you're a folder," he said, "if people know that you're going to be weak, they're going to go after you."

Trump said it was "a whole presentation. It's a way of presenting.

"You've got to know your audience and by the way, for some people be a killer, for some people be all candy. For some people be different. For some people both."

Killer, candy, or both. That's Donald Trump.

What a remarkable time capsule from 1989, a full psychological study of a man, then a 42-year-old Manhattan real estate king. I never expected Donald Trump to become president or a defining political figure of our time. The same instincts I reported on during his presidency are just as much a trademark of his character back then. Here, in this interview 35 years ago, we see the origin of Trumpism in the words of Trump himself.

ONE

Thirty-five Years Later



As rioters stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021, President Donald Trump watched on television from his private dining room next to the Oval Office. His supporters climbed the walls of the historic building, shattered windows and attempted to force the front doors open with a battering ram.

Gallows were being set up outside. “Hang Mike Pence. Hang Mike Pence. Hang Mike Pence,” Trump’s supporters called for the vice president, who had refused to overthrow the certification of Biden’s 2020 election win.

“Where is the president?” Republican House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy was calling the White House, asking aides to connect him with Trump. McCarthy’s office was being vandalized. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s was being ransacked. Supporters took pictures with their feet on her desk. They left a note on her keyboard: WE WILL NOT BACK DOWN.

Congressional leaders, including McCarthy and Pelosi, had been rushed out by Capitol security and driven to a secure location, Fort McNair, a U.S. Army post a few blocks from the Washington Nationals baseball stadium. But their staff were still in there, hiding in various offices with the lights switched off, desks barricading the doors.

President Trump finally got on the phone.

“You’ve got to get out and tell these people to STOP! We’ve been run over,” McCarthy said. He was intense. “Someone just got shot.”

At 2:44 p.m., Air Force veteran Ashli Babbitt was shot and killed by a police officer inside the Capitol as she and others tried to breach a door near lawmakers. Among the rioters were leaders of pro-Trump, far-right militia groups, the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys, as well as conspiracy theorists from groups like QAnon. What began as a Trump rally had escalated into a violent attack on the constitutional order of the United States.

“I’ll put a tweet out or something,” Trump replied.

“They’ve taken over the Capitol!” McCarthy yelled at him. “You’ve got to tell them to stop. You’ve got to get them out of here. Get them out of here. Now.”

The president seemed not to grasp the gravity of the situation. “Well, Kevin, I guess these people are more upset about the election than you are,” Trump said.

The FBI later estimated that over 2,000 people entered the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Five people died, 172 police officers were injured, and more than 500 were arrested. The cost of the damage to the historic Capitol building exceeded \$2.7 million.

It took President Trump *187 minutes* to post a tweet telling his supporters to “go home.”

Two months earlier, Donald Trump had lost the 2020 election to Joe Biden. But he rejected the loss. Instead, he said it was “rigged,” “a fraud on the American public,” and “stolen.”

Even now, 35 years after our interview, Trump was convinced any loss—even a presidential election loss—could be brushed aside if he simply *didn’t fold*.

At Trump’s “Save America” rally on January 6, he urged his supporters to “fight like hell.”

“We won this election, and we won it by a landslide.

“We will never give up. We will never concede.

“We are going to the Capitol.”

The House Select Committee investigating the January 6 attack later concluded that Trump “engaged in a successful but fraudulent effort to persuade tens of millions of Americans that the election was stolen from him.”

Garret Miller, a Trump supporter who brought a gun to the Capitol on January 6, said, “I believed I was following the instructions of former President Trump.”

Another supporter, Lewis Cantwell, testified that he had watched President Trump on TV “telling the world” the election was stolen. “What else would I believe, as a patriotic American who voted for him?”

Stephen Ayres, who also stormed the Capitol that day, said he was “hanging on every word [Trump] was saying.” Ayres had posted on social media that “Civil War will ensue” if Trump did not stay in power for a second term.

“You need to call Joe Biden and you need to do it today,” House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy told Trump shortly after the attack.

No, Trump said. He claimed Biden only won because of fraud.

“Stop saying that,” McCarthy said. “Just stop saying that. You need to leave Joe Biden a letter in the desk.”

A tradition.

“Well, I haven’t decided,” Trump said.

McCarthy was emotional and exhausted. The violence on January 6 carried a shocking, traumatizing weight.

“Your legacies will be different now because of that day,” McCarthy warned him. “Call Joe Biden.”

No, Trump said.