

“Major. Fantastic. I watched you with President Obama two weeks ago. He was not thrilled. I’m sure I’ll be more thrilled.”

Those were the first words Donald Trump spoke to me. And they should have told me so much more than they did.

At the time, they told me nothing. I was surprised by what sounded like informality and an odd sense that somehow my presence at an August 2015 press conference with Trump in Birch Run, Michigan, mattered.

As for the “thrill,” I have been a journalist in Washington since 1990 and attended thousands of press conferences in the Capitol, in the White House briefing room and in campaign venues across the country and “thrill” had never been part of the politico patter. Who gets thrilled or not thrilled? Angry, sure. Evasive, of course. Bored, sometimes. But thrilled? That was a circus word. Not a campaign word.

Had I taken time to analyze that sentence, I would have learned a lot about Trump. But I didn’t. I foolishly thought it was silly rhetoric from a silly reality TV celebrity running a silly campaign for the presidency.

How silly I was. How silly almost all of us were.

If I had taken the time, if I had been more curious and paid Trump more respect, I would have diagrammed that sentence—in literal and psychological ways—and found a trove of information. Like so much with Trump, it was all out in the open. Trump at times made it hard to listen—hard to fathom him, hard to take him and his “movement” seriously. Experienced political reporters like me have grown accustomed to being spoken to (perhaps even stroked) in certain ways by politicians and those who serve them. By that I mean our experience left us sensitized to and desensitized by the sick pseudoscience of campaign strategy, focus groups, wedge issues, bank shots, double bank shots, feints, dog whistles, doublespeak, okeydoke and flimflammy. Trump didn’t play that game. He spoke beneath voters, never down to them. He bypassed political reporters entirely and scorned the process of engagement, disarmament and flattery. When I say Trump spoke beneath his supporters I mean he met them at their level and then made them feel smarter—as if what they had long been thinking was now the truth of our times. This mystified traveling reporters and enthralled Trump supporters. Trump lifted his supporters up and tossed skeptical reporters on a metaphorical pyre of their own skepticism. I don’t think many of us, in the moment, saw Trump for what he was or is. We never bothered to seriously study the strutting, trumpeting id that was transforming American politics before our very eyes—and paving the most improbable path to the Oval Office ever.

Ever.

If we had paid closer attention to Trump—what he was telling us and how he was harnessing the passions of millions—we would have understood the campaign better and been less surprised. And we would have had a leg up in comprehending the chaotic maelstrom that became his first year as president.

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