

The Trump Tapes (Part-2): Beware the demon pomposity



By Nate Smelle

Sitting there in the Isabel Bader Theatre during taping of the TVO Today Live event with investigative journalist Bob Woodward and Steve Paikin, I could not make sense of the feeling of déjà vu that came over me as I listened to the two veterans discuss 'Truth and Trump.' It wasn't until after I had listened to the full two hour recording from that night for the fourth time, that it occurred to me why I had experienced such a profound sense of familiarity being in that time and space, considering it was the first time I had set foot in the theatre. More specifically, it was the moment during their discussion when Paikin pointed out that Woodward had been one of a few voices in the media back in 2016, who believed Trump had a decent chance of defeating Hillary Clinton and the Democrats. Despite the fact I had been following the race closely, I, along with most of the journalists covering the 2016 US election had written Donald Trump off as a token candidate; a sideshow freak of sorts, intended to lure a new breed of Republican voter into betting on a race in which Trump himself would never run. At least that was my impression of the Trump candidacy until Oct. 7, 2016. I remember the day vividly because it was on this day that I started to see 'The Donald' as the threat to global peace and democracy that he has since proven himself to be. The reason this day stands out so clearly in my mind is because it was that morning that I drove south to Wilmington, Ohio to meet filmmaker Michael Moore, and cover the taping of his documentary, Trumpland. Moore, like Woodward, was among that small faction of journalists and political analysts who warned the world about the threat to democracy Trump posed in 2016. Still, as convincing as Moore was on stage, and during our conversation afterwards at the tavern across the street from the theatre, I could not bring myself to believe that Americans would elect someone running on such a blatantly racist and socially regressive platform. I mean come on, this was the same country that had recently taken a sharp turn left after eight years of George W. Bush by electing Barack Obama president, twice. Adding to my disbelief and lack of fear for what was to come was also the fact that on my way to The Murphy Theatre on Oct. 7, 2016, the now infamous Access Hollywood tape of Trump bragging about using his celebrity status to sexually assault women was released. Leaving Wilmington the next morning, I decided to take a short six hour detour through the backroads on my way home. Noticing the ridiculous abundance of Trump signs on peoples' lawns, and the creative energy that went into the many homemade anti-Democrat signs I saw on my trip north, it hit me that Moore, Woodward, and a handful of other keen political experts might actually have their fingers on the nation's pulse. Now, nearly six years, four months, a pandemic, and one Trump-led insurrection later, Woodward is once again warning us of the dangers that come with electing a dictator-friendly, corporate fascist such as Trump. What resonates with me personally in regard to Woodward's warning this time around is the manner in which he decided to release the unedited recordings of the 20 interviews he had with the former president during such a pivotal time in human history. Through his release of The Trump Tapes, Woodward did far more than just shine a bright light on the ex-Commander-in-Chief's criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic; or, his disdain for democracy and recklessly cozy relationship with the world's tyrants. By allowing the world to hear Trump express his self-centred, often delusional approach to the American presidency in his own voice, Woodward in turn exposed a far more sinister force at play in the world today. That being: the devaluation of truth by those in power as a means of

manipulating the masses. Of course this type of careless disregard for facts and truth in politics was not a new product manufactured by the Trump administration. To some degree, we see this tactic employed during every political campaign here in Canada and around the world. Woodward addressed this unfortunate reality when asked by Paikin to share his insight into the comparison between Trump and former U.S. president Richard Nixon. Highlighting the similarity in how these two rejected 'leaders' exhibited a contempt for truth, Woodward shared a quote from 'Tricky Dick' that could have come from Trump himself: 'Never forget,' Nixon told his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, 'the establishment is the enemy. The professors are the enemy. The press is the enemy. The press is the enemy. The press is the enemy. Write that on a blackboard 100 times and never forget it.' In hindsight, from a certain twisted and corrupt point of view, Nixon was right, the press, the professors, and any essential worker engaged in the never-ending quest for truth are the enemy of those who prefer to use 'alternative facts' to fool voters. From a clearer vantage point where the needs of the many are given priority over the individual interests of the few, one can see how vital accurate information is when it comes to electing a socially responsible government. While on stage with Paikin, Woodward shared another story that got my wheels turning. He recalled a letter that he and his colleague Carl Bernstein received from Katharine Graham, the publisher of The Washington Post, after their reporting helped expose Nixon's role in the Watergate scandal. According to Woodward, Graham wrote: 'Dear Carl and Bob, Now Nixon has resigned, and you did some of the stories; now don't start thinking too highly of yourselves. And let me give you some advice - and that advice is - Beware the demon pomposity.' Conducting an impromptu survey of the audience at the Isabel Bader Theatre, Woodward asked how many people considered 'the demon pomposity' to be a problem in U.S. politics, the media, and on Wall Street. Everyone in the crowd of more than 300 raised their hand. Asking next how many people believed that 'the demon pomposity' was a problem in Canada, almost the same number - with the exception of around 10 people - raised their hands. Thinking of how those in bed with 'the demon pomposity' justify the use of misinformation to accomplish their individual goals - one example in Trump's case being his failed seditious conspiracy to overthrow his democratically elected successor, President Joe Biden - I realized how the release of The Trump Tapes is a clarion call for journalists everywhere to reaffirm our appreciation of the truth by raising the standards in which we report objective facts. In sharing the more than eight hours of recordings of Trump, Woodward gave the public a glimpse of who Trump is as a person - a view only he and a relatively small group of White House insiders have had the opportunity to observe. Catching up with Woodward after the show, I had a chance to ask him for advice regarding how to deal with people, especially those on the far-right of the political spectrum, who are so willing to embrace 'alternative facts' that fit the false narrative of their choice. 'But, how do you know?' declared Woodward. 'See, that's the question. That's where journalists come along and say, this is supported, this is not supported, this is true, this is not true.' Upon expressing my frustration with how difficult can be to identify and share objective facts in an environment where objective facts don't matter to nearly half of the population, Woodward responded, 'You have to be patient. When we got all those memos from Rudy Giuliani to [Republican Senator] Lindsey Graham saying that 256,000 prisoners in Wisconsin voted on election day - there wasn't one! And we were able to check.' With social media allowing the average citizen an opportunity to weigh in on conversations that are a critical to maintaining the best quality of life for the greatest number of people, I implore everyone to triple-check the 'facts' they choose to share online. Only then will we be able to keep 'the demon pomposity' under control.