

The Trump Tapes]



By Nate Smelle

Last Wednesday morning as I was headed for Coe Hill, I received an invite to attend the taping of a special episode of TVO Today Live with host Steve Paikin and his guest Bob Woodward of The Washington Post. On most occasions when an invitation to cover an event in in downtown Toronto on a Thursday evening comes in, I have to pass given the distance and cost to get from here to there. However, as soon as I noticed in the email that there would be a chance to speak with Woodward after the show, I confirmed my intention to attend, and began making arrangements for the trip.

For those unfamiliar with Woodward's work, he first had a hand in defining history when he, along with fellow investigative journalist Carl Bernstein shone a light on former U.S. president Richard Nixon's involvement in the Watergate scandal. Throughout his career he has written 21 books focused largely on American politics and current affairs.

In October 2022, Woodward added another volume to his catalogue with the release of The Trump Tapes. Upon his release of the tapes, the legendary non-partisan investigative journalist gifted the public with the uncensored recordings of 20 interviews between himself and the disgraced and disgruntled former Commander-in-Chief. Recorded mostly between December 2019 and August 2020, the tapes provide a rare glimpse into Trump's chaotic and often dangerous approach to the presidency. By sharing these unedited, on the record conversations, Woodward has also served up a uniquely accurate historic record of a reckless ?leader? at a pivotal moment in world history.

Having reported on Trump's hilariously terrifying antics since his run for the presidency in 2016, I felt compelled by the opportunity to be in Toronto the next night for the taping no matter what obstacles may impede my path. Telling myself this as I listened to excerpts of The Trump Tapes on my way to interview artist Arne Roosman in Coe Hill Wednesday afternoon, I had no clue about how many challenges I would face in the next 24 hours in order to attend the show.

Leaving Roosman's home shortly after 6 p.m. I unexpectedly stepped out his front door into a blizzard. To my own peril, I had neglected to keep an eye on that weather that day, instead focusing on preparing myself for a potential conversation with Woodward after the taping.

Spending about 10 minutes clearing the snow and ice from my car, I started the engine and let it warm up for a bit before attempting to traverse the mild incline of the road ahead. Failing to reach the top a dozen or so times, I backed up more than 100 metres until I found flat ground where I could get traction. Agreeing with myself to take one last ?pedal to the metal? shot at it before giving up and spending the night at Roosman's, I gave it everything I had and somehow swerved my way to the top of the hill.

By the time I reached the road leading home, the drive which should have taken 25 minutes had taken more than an hour. Noticing the hill at the base of my road had not been ploughed, I realized that I would need to hike home from the main road on the Heritage Trail. On a good day this is only about a 10-15 minute hike, however, in lieu of the blowing snow and -18 degree temperature outdoors, this was not a good day.

Walking in the door, a heat wave from the furnace hit my face, reminding me that the next day I would need to freeze myself to the bone again in order to dig the car out from where it was parked. Forcing myself to forget about the challenging day in waiting, I poured myself a glass of whisky and stayed up until almost 4 a.m. listening to as much on The Trump Tapes as I could find online.

So much for my quest to reduce screen time, I thought to myself as I noticed the clock move closer to sunrise.

Awakening around 9 a.m. I decided to spend a few hours knocking off all the phone calls and emails that demanded my attention. Realizing that I needed to hit the road for Toronto by 3 p.m. at the latest if I were to make it to the show on time, I had a quick bite to eat before stepping into my cross-country skis and heading for the car. Arriving at my vehicle - more accurately the pile of snow where I remembered parking it the night before - I used my ski to clear as much snow away from the tires as possible. Almost an hour and a half later, I finally was able to get my car moving in the right direction with the help of three kind strangers who stopped to give me the final push needed.

Turning onto Hwy 62 I turned up the radio to try and trick myself into ignoring the persistent scraping noise now coming from beneath my vehicle. The noise getting louder and louder, I pulled over near Bancroft when I realized turning the radio up full blast would not fix the problem beneath me. Sliding under the car, I could see that a piece of aluminum had been partially torn off; most likely when I was attempting to dislodge the car from the snow bank. Grabbing my long-handled ice scraper from the car, I swore loudly as I wrestled and bent the troublesome car part into a place where it stopped screaming.

Back in the road now, I set the radio to Curtis Mayfield and aimed the car for the bright lights of Ontario's capital city. Rolling into the lobby of the Isabel Bader Theatre with about 15 minutes to spare, I made myself comfortable in the press area, and prepared my equipment.

During their conversation on stage, host Steve Paikin masterfully dug into The Trump Tapes with Woodward, helping reveal what he learned from spending so much time with one of the most infamous and popular political figures in the nation's history. Throughout the evening the two touched on topics arising on the tapes, such as: Trump's unprecedented corruption of the Oval Office; his careless instinct-based approach to international relations; the war in Ukraine; Trump's 'criminal' response to COVID-19; former U.S. president Richard Nixon and Watergate; and the threat Trump's brand of corporate fascism poses for democracy in America and around the world.

While there were several highlights from the discussion that evening worth noting, one that stood out for me came when Paikan asked Woodward to compare Trump with Nixon. Although each of these individuals achieved their own degree of notoriety during their presidency, Woodward pointed out how the Republican Party eventually stepped up to hold Nixon accountable for his role in the Watergate scandal. Acknowledging how fundamentally different the Republican Party is today, he explained how Trump has such a tight grip on the party, that Republicans are afraid to challenge him no matter what he does.

To illustrate this point, Woodward shared a story of speaking event he participated in while visiting Midland, Texas ... the 'oil capital of Texas' aka 'Trump country.' Speaking to the room of 200 or so gathered for the event in Midland, he asked how many in the room that night believed that the 2020 election was stolen. Not seeing a single hand go up in the very conservative crowd, Woodward said he felt like stopping the event to make a call to the newspaper. Asking the same group how many were still planning to support Trump in 2024, Woodward said approximately 25 people raised their hands.

Following their conversation, I had a chance to ask Woodward a couple questions. First, I asked if he could speak to what it is about a corrupt, corporate individual like Trump that appeals to people, especially working class voters. Noting how historians would be attempting to answer this question for decades or more he explained how Trump found his voice and garnered their support by

claiming to have been 'wronged' and 'cheated'.

'Trump he kind of found a voice: 'They are against me, they're after me.' All of this is in the discussions on the tapes,' Woodward said.

'I know from polls that people in the United States feel they've been cheated, they've been wronged.'

'But the notion that he would be there champion is unusual,' Paikin chimed in.

'Yeah, but he found that voice, and the old order was dying,' responded Woodward. 'And he presented a new order. Whether it was logical, obviously in many ways it was not truthful.'

With so many massive issues on the table and not enough space to address them here, I highly recommend watching the broadcast of the show set to air on TVO Feb. 3 at 8 p.m. The entire event can also be viewed starting on Feb. 1 on TVO Today, The Agenda's YouTube channel and the TVO Today mobile app. Just as this edition of Bancroft This Week was being sent to press news broke that Trump had launched a \$50-million lawsuit against Woodward and the publisher of The Trump Tapes, Simon & Schuster. Check out this column next week for more from Bob Woodward as we dive deeper into The Trump Tapes.

To be continued...