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Donald Trump playing golf at Mar-a-Lago in 1993. | Yann Gamblin/Paris Match via Getty Images

TRUMPOLOGY

How Mar-a-Lago Taught Trump to Play Politics

When Trump dropped the outsider act and became a glad-handing politico—and a crusader against anti-Semitism.

By LAURENCE LEAMER | February 01, 2019

Tn 1002 Donald Trump took on the political establishment of Palm Beach

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that he planned to sell on his 17-acre Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach. Trump, who had bought the estate from cereal heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post in 1985, had looked at the development plan as one way out of his infamous early 1990s financial troubles, which included four business bankruptcies and millions of dollars lost for his investors.

But the town council disliked the flamboyant New York businessman so much that its members had voted against the subdivision plan. They left Trump with the same problem: a financial mess and a historic Palm Beach estate with endless potential and an enormous mortgage but a community of establishment elites standing in the way of turning it into something profitable.

Trump turned to Paul Rampell, a lawyer who lived in Palm Beach and came recommended by a banker with whom Trump had done business.

Rampell had grown up on the north end of the island. He had gone to Princeton and returned to Palm Beach to practice trust law, a lucrative field that had few risks and low visibility. The attorney had a reputation for being able to resolve almost any case out of court. He could have been a successful lawyer in New York or Washington, but he preferred the Palm Beach life.

Rampell had an idea: to turn Mar-a-Lago into the private club it is today, and which also doubles as the president's "Winter White House," where he will return this weekend after a long absence. Rampell's suggested change would require approval from the town council, and the odds were stacked against Trump and Rampell.

Since Trump had arrived in Palm Beach in 1985, he had disrupted the staid order established by the mostly older Palm Beach residents with his loud, all-night parties and his refusal to pander to the sedate rules of the old Palm Beach. Regularly mocked in the local society pages and unwelcome at the most prestigious social events, Trump responded by thumbing his nose at the elites. "I generally find them to be unattractive people, the most unattractive I've ever met," he told *New York* in 1990 about the high-society set. Perhaps most surprisingly, he attacked the anti-Semitism of old Palm

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But Trump dropped his outsider posturing when it came time to get what he wanted. In order to win approval from the town council to turn Mar-a-Lago into a private club, Trump finally agreed to play by their rules: hosting expensive fundraisers, making the right friends and learning how to play politics. In Palm Beach, he gave up his open disdain to play by the elite's rules. And the outsider image had to go.

Rampell understood far better than Trump how Palm Beach worked. So, in the wake of his failure to divide Mar-a-Lago, Trump invited Rampell for a meeting at the estate.

As a boy, Rampell remembered Mar-a-Lago as being “kind of like the forbidden city in China that hardly anybody went in or out of,” and it was exciting for him to be in the mansion.

Rampell told me that he told Trump it would have been a mistake to divide Mar-a-Lago. It was a risky thing to say to a man who had just spent 18 months trying to do just that.

“I think you ought to turn Mar-a-Lago into a club,” Rampell said.

After thinking about this a little, Trump decided it just didn't make any sense. According to Rampell, Trump called it a “crazy idea.”

When Trump called Rampell the next day, he squandered not a moment on small talk but carried on as if they were continuing their discussion at Mar-a-Lago.

“The memberships will never sell,” Rampell recalls Trump saying.

“The town of Palm Beach is probably about half Christian and half Jewish,” Rampell, who was Jewish himself, replied. “There are five clubs right now. Four of those clubs are restricted. No Jews. No African-Americans. And there are about four or five thousand members. There's one club only where Jewish residents can go, and that's the Palm Beach Country Club. It only has three hundred membership slots. They're all

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Palm Beach hadn't always been so unwelcoming to Jews. In the early years, any number of German-American Jews came down to the island from New York City each winter and were welcomed in the exclusive clubs. That all changed in 1944, when a Jewish American Boston businessman, A. M. Sonnabend, attempted to purchase two hotels on the island, a beach club and a rundown golf course that he planned to renovate.

A group of Palm Beach gentlemen calling themselves the Committee of the Select 100 met at the Everglades Club to decide how to deal with this threat. The group decided that if 10 of them put up 50,000 dollars each, they could pay off Sonnabend, buy the properties themselves and keep Palm Beach as it was. These men could have easily written checks for that amount but most of these Palm Beach WASPs had one trait in common. Generously, they were described as "frugal," but more accurately they were cheap, and they were not about to write checks for an uncertain venture.

When news of Sonnabend's purchase spread, Jews from all across the eastern United States began making Palm Beach their winter home. Most of their families were originally from Eastern Europe. To the old Palm Beachers, it was not just that there were so many of these new arrivals, but they seemed Jewish in a way their predecessors had not. And they made part of Palm Beach their own, largely in high rises in the southern part of the town.

As more Eastern European Jews came onto the island in the 1940s and 1950s, old Palm Beach retreated back into its own clubs and customs, tightening its restrictive policies. The Palm Beach establishment barred anyone who had even one Jewish ancestor from the premises of their clubs. (There was one club, the Palm Beach Country Club, that was essentially a Jewish club, with only a few gentile members.)

Almost anyone considering starting a club that would likely be identified as overwhelmingly Jewish would have wondered if doing that in Palm Beach was such a great idea. It was basically asking for war with the establishment. According to Rampell, Trump didn't think about this at all. Trump never demonstrated that this issue was of any concern to him. Nor did he fancy himself a social activist

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That would leave a not-yet-elected fifth member as the likely deciding vote.

Rampell decided that the most likely of the three candidates for that seat to end up voting for the club was Michele Clarke Royal, a third-generation Palm Beacher and a member of the Bath and Tennis, with no political experience. If Trump personally contributed to her campaign, he might appear to be trying to buy her vote. Rampell's money would be almost as bad, so the lawyer came up with other ways of helping Royal, including running a phone bank from his office and asking friends in the Northeast to donate to Royal's campaign.

While Rampell was working to win a majority of the town council, two prominent members of the restricted Everglades Club came to the lawyer's office. The Palm Beach gentlemen told him there was no way the town council would approve Trump's plan. The sooner he and his patron realized that, the better. They represented a group in whom the town authorities had the highest confidence, and they wanted to buy Mar-a-Lago and turn it into a club themselves.

Although the two men were not so frank in declaring their intentions, they were trying to do what the Committee of the Select 100 had failed to do in 1944: buy up property to prevent the influx of large numbers of Jewish Americans.

Rampell had no doubt but that their club would have the same restricted policies as the Everglades, which did not allow Jews and where he would not be welcome. Rampell had no choice but to take the proposal to Trump.

"F--- them," Trump said, according to Rampell. Rampell felt that Trump wanted no part of handing Mar-a-Lago over to a group that would turn the estate into a restricted club. "They're assholes."

The lawyer did not disagree.

Donald Trump's anti-Semitism at Mar-a-Lago town council hearing

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Trump threw himself into the fight. This man who had been so indifferent, even disdainful toward the local community transformed himself into everyone's favorite neighbor, a jocular, backslapping buddy with time for everybody.

Trump invited 215 members and guests of the Historical Society of Palm Beach County to Mar-a-Lago for the society's annual award presentation in February 1993. For the special occasion, the organization charged a heady \$125 a person, more than four times the 30 dollars the event had cost the previous year.

To get his way, Trump was willing to say anything and embrace anyone, including the honoree, professor Donald W. Curl, who had attacked Trump's plan to subdivide the estate. Trump remembered every slight and forgave nothing, but he was beyond cordial to Curl and treated him as a dear friend. Trump acted as if his idea of a good time was hanging out with a bunch of local historians.

"Maybe we'll do this on a yearly basis," he told the group. That was a neat touch. If he got his club, the Historical Society might be welcomed back.

The Historical Society event was not the only occasion on which Trump wooed the locals. For eight years straight, the Palm Beach Round Table, a popular luncheon group, had invited Trump to speak, but he had always said no. Now he was available. The February event took place in the grand ballroom at the Ramada Resort in West Palm Beach, with space for 500 guests.

To make sure the event was a sellout, the Round Table ran ads in the *Palm Beach Daily News* and the *Palm Beach Post* two weeks before, announcing the luncheon was open to the public.

The ballroom was full to hear the first speech Trump had ever given in Palm Beach County. Trump spent most of his half-hour talk promoting the idea of a club. "It will guarantee the future preservation of Mar-a-Lago beyond Donald Trump," he said, according to an account from the *Palm Beach Daily News*. When he finished taking questions, Trump invited everyone present to come over to Mar-a-Lago, where he had soft drinks and wine ready to greet them.

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One of the guests was Etonella Christlieb, a Dutch-born woman who lived with her South African husband, John, and their three children on an estate facing the Intracoastal Waterway. A member of the Palm Beach Round Table board, she was also raising money to upgrade the Palm Beach County School of the Arts in West Palm Beach.

“I’ve heard what you’re doing with this school,” Trump said, according to Christlieb. “I’d like to help. I’ll give you a party here at Mar-a-Lago for 75 people.”

“That’s wonderful, Mr. Trump,” the young socialite said.

“What do you charge for your fund-raisers?” Trump asked.

“We’ve been charging \$35.”

“Well, you’re charging \$1,000, and they’ll come,” Trump said.

That was an almost unthinkable amount of money to ask for what was a decidedly unchic charity, but Trump had an astute understanding of Mar-a-Lago’s value when coupled with his name.

Christlieb wasn’t so sure. She went back to her fellow board members for the school foundation, and they said yes, enthusiastically.

Hosting the benefit was a smart thing for Trump to do as part of his public relations offensive, and it gave him cachet with a powerful community group.

During those few weeks when Trump courted Palm Beach, he learned something invaluable. When he wanted people to like him and ratcheted up his charm, something magical happened. It didn’t matter what he had said before, he could turn his auditors around with a few well-placed words and have them lapping up his utterances.

Trump was on such a roll with this new persona that he did something he almost never did. He apologized. He accepted some of the blame for the problems he’d had

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