

Donald Trump's performance didn't change on *The Celebrity Apprentice*. But the names around him got slightly bigger—and more unruly. One day, according to a member of the *Apprentice* team, NeNe Leakes stormed off the set after a fight with another celebrity. As the producers gave up on Leakes, Trump chased her out onto the street, persuading her to go back upstairs. Trump was still a pretend ruler, yet his subjects were so difficult that he had to step in to actually govern—something he'd left to producers in the past. And the celebrities responded to his brass-knuckles approach to leadership and to his terse judgments of their business acumen.

*The Celebrity Apprentice* might have been campy, but it's not an inconsequential chapter in the life story of Donald Trump. Seven of *The Apprentice*'s fourteen seasons were cast with familiar faces, and their ringleader continued to gain admission into millions of living rooms, cracking jokes, acting as a doting father and bragging about his wealth. Even as the audience size was a fraction of what it once was, Trump's having the likes of Sharon Osbourne, Sinbad, Meat Loaf, Kevin Jonas, and Kate Gosselin grovel for his attention only reinforced his image as an all-knowing captain of business. And it made Trump the king of these other messy celebrities.

"He did a good job," Trump says about Geraldo Rivera. "He was smart. He was cunning."

Rivera was, in the years after his time on the show (on which he eventually finished in second place), in an unusual position among *Celebrity Apprentice* contenders, as a journalist who would go on to cover Trump as a politician. When I ask Trump whether they're still on good terms, he tells me a story. "After I lost the election . . .," Trump says. These words come tumbling from his mouth, almost against his own will, and he winces in surprise. It's a moment of candor that catches Trump off guard; even he can't believe he said it.

The spin artist in him takes immediate control, trying to erase this humiliating gaffe of speaking the truth—one that could alienate his base and cost him his pride. "I won the election, but then when they *said* we lost . . .," Trump corrects himself, looking pleased at his own rapid backtracking. "He called me up three or four times. I didn't take his call, because I was so busy fighting it, with what went on." It's remarkable, then, with "with what went on," Trump remembers with such specificity how frequently Rivera tried to reach him.

"And finally, I had a little time," Trump says. "I called him back. And he went on Fox News, and he started talking about—'The president called me!'"

After they'd hung up, Rivera tweeted about their conversation on November 13, 2020, ten days after the election and six days after Joe Biden was declared the winner: "Just had a heartfelt phone call w friend @realDonaldTrump who said he's a 'realist' who'll do the 'right thing' But he wants to see what 'states do in terms of certification (etc)' He sounded committed to fighting for every vote & if he loses, talking more about all he's accomplished."

Rivera's tweet did not go over well in the White House. On this afternoon in August 2021, Trump sets the record straight. "I didn't call him," Trump says. "I returned his phone call,

and *he* started talking very personally about how I was feeling, how I was doing.” By announcing that Trump would “do the right thing,” Rivera sent the wrong signal to the public on behalf of Trump, who was still fully focused on staying in charge. “And I said, ‘That’s a real betrayal,’” Trump says. “I didn’t talk about how I was feeling. It was a phone call that lasted very quickly.”

The actor in Trump can’t resist paraphrasing what he recalls from this exchange. “Just— ‘Hey, how are you doing, Geraldo? How’s it going?’ He’s not my psychiatrist!” (Trump has never needed one.) “He made it sound like it was such a big deal. It was nothing. All I did was return his call. But he said, ‘The president called me,’ like I’m reaching out to him. And I haven’t spoken to him since.”