

## Chapter Ten

# How to Fix a Poll

By the beginning of 2014, it was apparent that Trump was seriously considering running for President, to my delight. As we prepared to make the announcement—a process I helped manage with microscopic precision—we ran into a bump in the road. The premise of Trump’s candidacy would be that he was famous as a highly respected real estate developer and billionaire businessman. That was a central proposition, along with his celebrity and willingness to say and do things that were politically incorrect.

But at the time, CNBC was conducting an online poll to determine the twenty-five most influential business people alive to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the network. Trump was one of the two hundred businessmen listed as contenders. I learned about the poll when I received an email from the Boss’s assistant, Rhona Graff, telling the staff of the Trump Organization that the vote was being conducted and requesting everyone to click on the hyperlink and vote for Mr. Trump. In any other business this would seem like a joke, the kind of thing David Brent would do on *The Office*, with the egomaniac boss looking like the self-aggrandizing fool he was. In Trumpland, however, this was not only perfectly normal, it was standard operating procedure. The two prime and coequal imperatives of the company were to protect Trump, usually from himself, and to feed his insatiable ego.

The CNBC poll seemed almost designed to challenge the self-regard of American business leaders. The criteria were a direct appeal—or attack—on the image of the two hundred candidates nominated for the competition, a list that included well-known moguls like T. Boone Pickens and Oprah and Steve Jobs. “The person must have been more than a good CEO,” the

rules said. “He/she should have altered business, commerce, management or human behavior—in other words, the person should be responsible for ushering in meaningful change, with business being the primary sphere of influence.”

The premise was irresistible to Trump: he would kill to win that competition, I knew the second I read about the poll. I immediately voted on my desktop, and then I voted again on my tablet, followed by votes registered from both of my cell phones, using four different IP addresses to disguise the multiple clicks. I figured if everyone in the company did the same thing, Trump would at least make the top ten. But when I looked at the results, with the running totals available online, I discovered Trump was near the bottom of the list—around 187 out of 200. Word around the office was that Trump wasn’t happy—“pissed” was the exact term—which was confirmed when one of his assistants brought a note from Trump to me. It was early in the morning, before most others had turned up for work, but Trump often woke before dawn, particularly if he was mad about something, as he frequently was. I was always an early bird myself, turning up before eight most mornings, our shared habit of waking early likely a function of our bond as teetotalers. The note consisted of a printout of the poll rankings, with the humiliating place Trump occupied highlighted by a black Sharpie circle, and in the margin in his distinctive, manic, all uppercase handwriting, “SEE ME ASAP.”

I entered Trump’s office carrying a notepad and pen.

“You want to see me, Boss?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “What can we do about this poll? I’m at the bottom of the fucking list. Check into this immediately and let me know.”

“Of course, Boss, I’m on it,” I said.

This was the kind of project Trump assigned to me. Trump didn’t say what he wanted me to do, because he didn’t have to: I knew immediately he wanted me to find a way to put the fix on the poll to increase his ranking.

This wouldn't involve attracting more voters, or trying to convince others that Trump fit the criteria, because the people answering the poll obviously didn't think he was the best candidate; to the contrary, the vote made him look ridiculous. But Trump knew he could count on me to figure out a way to cheat—a reality I take no pride in admitting.

Back in my office, I called my friend John Gauger, the chief information officer at Liberty University. I'd met John in 2012 when Trump had been invited by Jerry Falwell Jr. to address the school, and I'd accompanied him to Virginia. John also had a side business called RedFinch Solutions LLC, which provided services for search engine optimization and Internet reputational management. John was younger than me, in his early thirties, and I knew from past experience that he was a flexible thinker when it came to issues like the one I was confronting on Trump's behalf.

"Do me a favor," I said, sending him a link to the CNBC site. "Check into this online poll for me. The Boss is unhappy with his current standing and I need to know if there is something we can do."

Gauger asked for half an hour, promising he'd work on a solution. I went back to Trump's office to give him an update, knowing that if something was eating at him—and the poll clearly was—he wanted to be constantly updated. I told him I had a technology consultant looking for solutions.

"Get it done," he growled.

When Gauger called back he had a plan.

"Try to follow me on this," Gauger said, rattling off a bunch of numbers and tech terms that made no sense to me.

"Stop," I said. "Please, in English."

"I can do this very easily," John said. "The algorithmic code they're using is very basic. My team and I have already cracked it. We can manipulate the voting by inserting IP addresses casting votes for Mr. Trump based on the overall number of total votes, so the votes aren't visible. That way, we will be totally undetected while we move Mr. Trump higher in the rankings. But

we need to buy IP addresses since we don't own enough to make a dent in the rankings. At the same time, we'll perfect the algorithm to ensure a seamless strategy."

"How much does all that cost?" I asked.

"They aren't expensive," Gauger said. "It depends on how many we buy. Let's purchase a hundred thousand and see how that moves the needle. It'll cost \$7,500."

"Give me a few minutes and I'll get back to you," I said.

When I returned to Trump's office it was evident that he had been impatiently waiting to hear from me. When he wanted something done, he wanted it done yesterday, I knew, and what could be more important than fostering his reputation as a transcendental business figure and tycoon?

"What do you have for me?" Trump asked.

"Good news," I said. "A friend of mine has already cracked the algorithm being used by the polling company. Now we need to insert votes favorable to you."

"Really?" Trump asked. "Can we get caught?"

"Not according to my friend. What we need to do is purchase IP addresses. It'll cost \$7,500. We will need more but that will give us a gauge on getting the job done."

"Wow," Trump said. "Go do it. I want to be number one."

"Boss, you don't want to be number one," I said. "That will potentially attract unwanted attention. Let's go for, say number nine. Then you're in the top ten."

"Good," Trump said, looking very pleased that he was going to be able to manipulate the poll.

All morning, I obsessively checked the poll results as Trump's ranking began to rise. I was supposed to wait until three in the afternoon to check in with John Gauger, but I couldn't stand the suspense as I watched Trump rise into the top thirty. I had other projects that I was working on—actual



business matters that weren't purely throwing red meat at the caged-tiger-like ego of Donald J. Trump—but when I went to see the Boss on an unrelated and actually consequential subject, I discovered that he too was fixated on the CNBC poll.

“How are we doing?” Trump asked, without having to specify what he meant.

“We're at number twenty-nine and climbing,” I said. “I have a status call with my friend at three. I will update you then.”

“Man, your friend is great,” Trump said. “Who is he?”

“You don't want to know,” I said. “It's better that you don't even know his name. Let's just call it plausible deniability if something happens.”

“Something could happen?” Trump asked, now alarmed. “I thought you said it was undetectable.”

“It is,” I said. “But even if there's a one percent chance that something happens, you are able to truthfully state that you don't know who was involved.”

“Good,” said Trump. “But one day you'll tell me who it is.”

“Sure, Boss,” I said.

When three rolled around, Trump was still gradually but inexorably rising in the rankings. I called Gauger excitedly.

“Holy shit,” I said. “Trump is at twenty.”

“It won't be moving much more tonight,” he said. “We've been tracking the voting quantity over the day and it really slowed a lot, so we need to start again when the level of activity increases. We also need to buy more IP addresses so we have enough in reserve to make sure Mr. Trump gets to number nine.”

“Perfect,” I said. “Let's talk tomorrow.”

The next morning, I was in Trump's office by 8:30 talking to the Boss about nothing but the most pressing question of the day: his fake ranking.

By then he had moved up to eighteen and the volume of the voting was increasing, exactly as Gauger had said.

“We need more IP addresses to get back in the game today,” I told Trump.

“Go do it,” Trump said. “Keep me informed.”

“I’m authorized for another \$7,500?” I asked.

“Yes,” Trump said. “Just make sure I make it to the top ten.”

All that day, Gauger and his team of techies fed the fake IP “votes” into the poll, and all day, Trump continued his manufactured ranking rise. The poll closed at three that day, I knew, so I was constantly refreshing my search engine to monitor the results. Gauger had promised a top ten finish, predicting confidently the final result exactly at number nine.

As three o’clock neared, my intercom rang and I was summoned once more to see Trump.

“Do you know the poll closes at three today?” he asked, acting like he thought he knew something I didn’t.

“Yes, I do,” I said. “You are currently at number eleven. My friend has assured me that you will be number nine at closing time. He altered the algorithm and more votes will be cast for you.”

“Really great,” Trump said. “Good job . . . no, great job!”

When the poll closed, Trump was, as promised, number nine. I printed a copy of the poll and delivered it to Trump’s office. He was on the speakerphone when I entered, so he motioned me to sit. I dropped the poll on his desk and he smiled devilishly, with delight.

“Whoa,” he said to the person he was talking with on the phone. “I just got a CNBC poll that shows I’m the ninth-most-important businessman of the past twenty-five years. Not bad, huh?”

For the rest of the day the calls flooded in, praising Trump as he told everyone he talked to about his position in the polls. Like so much else with Trump, on one level he had to know the entire “accomplishment” was

nothing more than a lie. He'd paid to push the poll, as any sane person would have appreciated, but Trump was unhinged in reveling in the ranking, as if it was a real achievement and a real reflection of his standing in the business community and with the general public. If Trump's insistence weren't such a dangerous delusion—if all of this rampaging egomania hadn't come to have such dire consequences for the United States and the world—it would be funny. As people repeatedly told him that he deserved the recognition and that of course the result was predictable —“What would you expect,” was the sentiment, “you're Donald Trump”—his grip on reality appeared to vanish. Before long, Trump believed he really was rated in the top ten and was regarded as a profoundly important business figure. I not only enabled that belief, I actively and eagerly participated in perpetrating the myth.

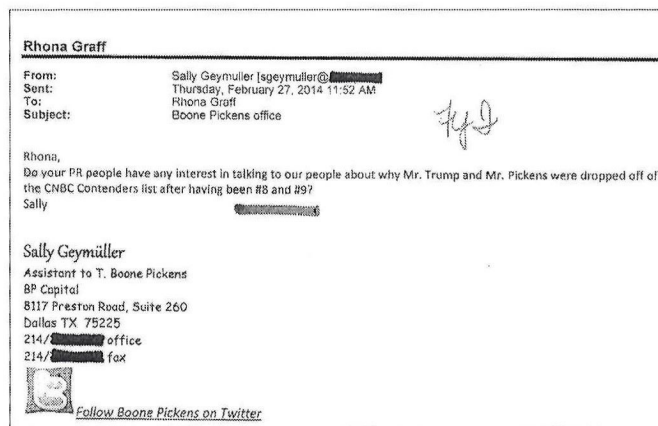
The feeling was euphoric—until the following day, when the bottom fell out of the scam. During the day, Trump discovered that CNBC claimed to have reserved the right to remove anyone they wanted from the list and that they had unilaterally removed his name from the list. The network didn't say why—they didn't have to, as written in very small print on the launch page of the poll.

Trump was incandescent. “What the hell!” he screamed at me. “Michael, I want you to call the president of CNBC and tell him we will sue them if they don't restore me to my rightful slot!”

I duly did as instructed, leaving a long and very strongly worded message with the president of CNBC's secretary explaining that I was Special Counsel and Executive Vice President to the Trump Organization and that legal action would be taken if the network didn't immediately reverse their outrageous and unfounded and capricious decision. The voters had spoken, I told her in my blunt and harsh tone, and Donald Trump absolutely insisted that his right to retain his ranking was of paramount importance. The poor secretary took my dictation and promised my call would be returned, in due



course. I walked thirty paces down the hall to Trump's office and reported what I had done. By then, Trump was figuring out who else had been removed from the list and it appeared that T. Boone Pickens, the Texan magnate and a Trump acquaintance, had also been dropped. There was no indication why Pickens had been removed, but given the famously gargantuan ego of the oil tycoon and corporate raider, he was as infuriated as Trump. The only difference was that he had made the list, to the best of my knowledge, fair and square.



The email from T. Boone Pickens's assistant to Rhona Graff. © 2020 Michael Cohen

Pickens sent an email to Rhona Graff, Trump's assistant, suggesting the two businessmen talk, so Trump instructed me to call him about starting a lawsuit or issuing a press release. I soon had Pickens on the line, as he told me in his Texas drawl how outraged he was by CNBC's high-handed attitude; we didn't discuss the reason he'd been taken off the list. Like Trump, he was furious and insulted and he intended to do something about it, so I suggested I get Trump on the line. I patched Trump in and soon we were having a three-sided conversation bemoaning the terrible injustice of the poll. Both men praised the other, stoking and stroking each other's egos, as they considered their options.

The call was certifiably insane, but I played along, offering my advice and counsel. A lawsuit would be expensive, it was agreed, without adding



that the likely outcome would be the discovery of the fraud and the humiliation of their ego trips being exposed to the public. That was a story I knew my journalist connections would eat up; nothing was quite as exciting for the press as stories revealing the egomania of self-aggrandizing rich white men.

After the Pickens call, I was summoned to Trump's office and instructed to call the reporters I knew to try to get them interested in a story about the terrible treatment Trump had received at the hands of CNBC. Trump wanted me to emphasize his ranking and make sure it was prominently discussed in any coverage.

"Do I discuss T. Boone Pickens as well?" I asked.

"No," Trump said. "Make it about just me. He will do his own. He's not my concern."

I wasn't surprised when there were no takers in the press. No one wanted to be treated like Trump's PR flak, at least not in the legitimate press; corrupt tabloids like the *National Enquirer* or biased broadcasters like Fox were another story. The general counsel for CNBC eventually called me and pointed out that there was a disclaimer on the website of the poll explicitly providing that any candidate could be removed, without cause and for any reason. When I protested loudly, channeling Trump's fury, the lawyer calmly said the Boss had been taken off the list and there would be no explanation given or apology forthcoming. It went without saying that the network might have figured out that Trump had cheated, and so I didn't push the matter further. In the end, the poll came and went and barely registered in the public consciousness. The important thing, for Trump, was the printout he had of the poll showing him at number nine. He had hundreds of copies made and he added the poll to the pile of newspaper clippings and magazine profiles of himself on his desk that he would give to visitors. That was one of the supposedly big treats about gaining entry to Trump's 26th floor office: a gift of a stack of stories about him, whether real

or fantasy, with the lucky few getting a complimentary Trump Gold Chocolate Bar Bullion.

If something didn't work out for Trump to his satisfaction, he dropped the whole project instantaneously, or at least after he'd wallowed in his outrage and anger. The same went for people. Or debts. Or promises. So I wasn't truly shocked when, a week later, I walked into Trump's office and dropped John Gauger's invoice for the work he'd done on the poll on his desk. The services rendered included purchasing the IP addresses and payment for the time spent by Gauger and his team to cheat on Trump's behalf. I'd written at the bottom of the invoice "Approved," hoping that Trump would just initial the document and I could close out the entire fiasco.

"Leave it," Trump said, appraising the invoice but not signing it. "We'll deal with it later."

"No worries," I said.

Walking back to my office, I had the sinking feeling that getting payment was going to be difficult, and that's exactly how it played out. Somehow, I deduced, in Trump's mind the poll hadn't yielded the desired result, and so he'd convinced himself that he shouldn't be burdened by having to pay for Gauger's services. That was precisely what Trump said when I raised the question with him a few days later. He complained that he didn't get credit for his #9 ranking, so why should he have to pay?

Knowing Trump as well as I did, I knew he wasn't going to pay up—and he knew that I knew. That was how things worked with Trump. Many, many things—really most things—were unspoken, especially if he was doing something dishonest or unethical. I wasn't going to confront him and explain how John had done all that he'd promised, or point out that I had taken a big risk on Trump's behalf by cheating and getting John to participate, or that John was a friend and someone I relied upon for web- and tech-related advice and I didn't want to burn that bridge. No one spoke the truth to Trump, and I'm sure that is the case now that he's turned the



White House into the mirror image of his office in the Trump Tower, with yes men like me doing his bidding and never, ever, ever confronting him with reality.

After failing miserably with Trump, I then tried to convince CFO Allen Weisselberg to pay the invoice, but he refused. He and Trump were like Frick and Frack when it came to stiffing vendors, so I knew that had little chance of actually working. In the end, Trump said he didn't want to pay the invoice because it would create a paper trail to prove that he had cheated in the CNBC poll. But he conceded that he would pay Gauger eventually, when enough time had passed to distance himself from the poll and make it difficult for any enterprising reporter or tax auditor to connect the payment to the questionable campaign to cheat. I told Gauger that he'd get paid someday, without saying when, and he agreed to keep the invoice as an open receivable, which enabled me to keep using him over the years, including during the madness of the election in 2016, when I truly got swept up in the tornado that was the Trump Campaign.

But first I had another catch and kill operation to run, not for Mr. Trump but for my dear friends, more like family to me, the Falwells—and, like the Bieber favor a few years earlier, this would have a huge impact on the 2016 election, evangelicals, the Supreme Court, and the fate of the nation. This situation began with a phone call, as so many did for me as a fixer, from Jerry Falwell Jr., telling me a story that stretched back years to a visit he and his wife had taken to Miami. They'd stayed at the five-star Fontainebleau Hotel and soaking up the sun the pair had become friendly with a kid working at the pool. Jerry called him a pool boy. He said they'd stayed in touch with the pool boy and talked about helping him finance a business with an investment in real estate. Jerry didn't fill me in on all the details, only that a deal was never consummated and the relationship ended with hard feelings. The kid had filed a lawsuit, Jerry said, but that wasn't why he'd called me, as I knew. I wasn't the lawyer you called to help with

litigation; I was the lawyer you called when you had a problem that needed to be solved—or made to go away.

By this time, I knew it had to be serious. The simple act of calling me to ask a favor was in itself like using up the favor, because he knew that if he asked me to do something for him I would move heaven and earth to help. Since the laying of hands ceremony in 2011, I'd stayed in steady contact with the Falwells, meeting them for dinner when they were in New York. I knew their children and shared in family news, as a close friend, much closer than Trump ever was to two of the most powerful evangelicals in the nation.

"This is personal," Jerry said.

"I will do everything I can for you," I vowed, and I meant it.

Jerry continued in a sheepish voice that somehow the pool boy had come into possession of photographs he'd taken on his phone. He said the photos weren't pornographic, or anything like that, but they were embarrassing. He said that he and his wife Becki had purchased a new tractor for their farm and Mrs. Falwell had started to pose for portraits as she climbed on to the hood of the tractor. One thing lead to another, Jerry said, now speaking like a man who knows he did something stupid that he regrets but he had to just own up to it and get it out. Becki had started to pose for photos with her top open a little bit, and then a lot, and then the top came off, then the bra, and soon she was vamping like a softcore MILF.

Pausing, as if to say, I know, I know, Jerry said that the terrible thing was that the pool boy was now threatening to shop the photographs to publications as a way to pressure the Falwells to settle the lawsuit on favorable terms. They had no idea how he'd managed to get the photos, Jerry said, although he had to have figured out a way to get into his phone, I surmised. The problem was that the Falwells had multiple children, which would make the release of the images mortifying, but their livelihoods also centered around their religious beliefs and reputations. If Becki Falwell was



seen half-naked by the students of Liberty University, let alone evangelicals all over the country, it would be an unmitigated disaster. Catch and kill, I thought, but in this case it was just going to be kill.

“Send me a copy of all the pleadings and the contact information for this young man,” I said. “I won’t call the pool boy, I’ll talk to his lawyer.”

“Becki is beside herself,” Jerry said. “She’s afraid these images will be all over the Internet.

“Relax,” I said. “Please tell Becki that I’m on it. This is personal to me as well. I will call you no later than tonight.”

The lawyer’s name and contact information were in the pleadings online, so I called immediately. I asked if he was still representing the pool boy and he said he was. I laid out the details of the situation, in outline, including the conversations between the parties when the pool boy had menaced the Falwells, saying he’d release the raunchy pictures of Mrs. Falwell.

Before the lawyer could speak, I went for the jugular.

“You are aware that his actions are tantamount to extortion,” I said. “I am going to ask you to contact him right now, ask him where the photos are, and if they are in his possession, he needs to turn them over to me and give me the names and contact information of anyone and everyone else who he showed the photographs to. I also need to know if he made any copies.

“Go now and do this,” I continued, “and call me right back. If I don’t hear from you by three o’clock this afternoon I will instruct the Falwells to contact the FBI and file a complaint.”

“That won’t be necessary,” the lawyer replied. “I’ll call you right after I speak to him.”

I called Becki and reassured her that the pictures wouldn’t get out, but I could hear the sadness and fear in her voice. I reassured her that I wouldn’t let her down, and I didn’t. When the lawyer called me back, he told me he’d spoken with his client and he was sure that the matter would end there. I

repeated that his client would face serious criminal charges if the pictures surfaced.

“That won’t happen,” the lawyer said.

“If by chance they do,” I said, “I will use every resource at my disposal to see that he goes to prison.”

“I assure you we will not be speaking again on this matter,” the lawyer said.

There it was: my second chit with the Falwells. In good time, I would call in this favor, not for me, but for the Boss, at a crucial moment on his journey to the Presidency.