



How Donald Trump Lost His Mojo

Flailing on race and immigration, his campaign in chaos, the candidate who made a brilliant farce of the election is now finding the joke is on him

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At first, it looks like the same old act. What could be more natural than a coiffed and bellicose Donald Trump, addressing a raucous crowd on a Friday afternoon in Manchester, New Hampshire, that great white-frustration campaign Mecca he blew through like a hurricane nine months ago during primary season?

"It is terrific to be back in New Hampshire!" he begins.

"TRUMP! TRUMP! TRUMP!" shouts the virtually all-white, mostly male crowd of fifty- and sixty- and seventysomethings. Trump's speeches increasingly look like VFW raffle nights.

"It's really a very special place for me," Trump goes on. "This is where I won my first victory!"

The prepared remarks handed out by the campaign indicate that Trump's next line will begin with the antiseptic phrase "Over the next 74 days, we are all going to work very hard to win this state...."

But this is Donald Trump, sworn enemy of the prepared remark.

He immediately jumps off-script to stay on his favorite subject: himself.

"If I didn't win here, who knows where I'd be," he says, mugging and humble-bragging for the crowd. "Maybe I'd be building buildings or something."

The audience roars. This is the Trump they fell in love with. It's the same über-confident, self-congratulating gasbag who bulldozed to the Republican nomination on the strength of long, unscripted rants that were glorious tributes to every teenager everywhere who has ever taken a test without studying. Now the scriptless wonder is back. Or is he?

"Hillary Clinton believes only in government of, by and for the powerful!" he booms, beginning a long rant on "Crooked Hillary." He speaks in harsh bursts of invective that sound at first like the same stream-of-consciousness turd clouds Trump spat out in great volumes during primary season.

But within a minute or two, he's muddling through a list of Clinton controversies in suspiciously grammatical language, and the air starts to leave the room.

He rails against the speaking fees paid to Bill Clinton by companies like the Swedish telecom giant Ericsson while it had business before Hillary's State Department, even using the phrase "the exemption of telecom giant Ericsson."

He denounces moves to give foundation donors suspicious reconstruction contracts in Haiti and a seat on an intelligence advisory board. Then, saying Clinton ran the State Department "like a personal hedge fund" (a phrase that makes no sense, even to people who hate hedge-fund managers), Trump mentions another controversy involving a Russian uranium company. Then, still another, involving the Swiss bank UBS.

It's a dead giveaway. The primary-season Donald Trump would never have been able to remember five things. Even more revealing is his rhetorical dismount: "But these examples," he shouts, "are only the tip of the Clinton-corruption iceberg!"

The real Donald Trump does not speak in metaphors, let alone un-mixed ones. The man who once famously pronounced "I know words, I have the best words" scorched through the primaries using the vocabulary of a signing gorilla ("China – money – bad!").

Last October, when Trump was an ascendant circus act whose every move mesmerized the global media, the *Boston Globe* did a linguistic analysis of the GOP field. The paper discovered that loserific hopefuls like Jim Gilmore and Mike Huckabee were speaking above the 10th-grade level. But Trump was crushing the competition using the language of a fourth-grader, below all of his competitors, including Ben Carson (sixth grade) and Ted Cruz (ninth grade).

It was a key to his success. In an era when the public above all hates professional politicians, Trump came off as un-rehearsed and genuine. He was a lout and a monster, but at least he was ad-libbed.

All that's gone now. And it's not just the language that's different.

When he was in New Hampshire for the primaries, he acted like a drunken stockbroker who fell off the end of a bar into a presidential race. He made a mockery of the most overcovered and self-serious political pageant on Earth. There was no come-on, no calculation, no "ground game," nothing, just one unhinged rich person making it all up as he went along, crapping on the Jeb Bushes and "Little Marcos" for the sheer scatological joy of it. Forget about poll-tested speeches, it was a miracle he wore pants on the stump.

That this tasteless rampage lifted him to the Republican nomination was a perfect farce predictable to anyone who's ever seen *The Producers*. He acted like a man trying to lose, and won. But now...

Now he's trying to win, and he's in free-fall. Polls show he will lose to one of the most unpopular Democratic nominees ever. And Trump, whose very name is supposed to be synonymous with hedonism and hoggish excess, looks in person like a picture of misery.

It's obvious that reading someone else's words depresses Trump to no end, which is why he's never really done it. His father's eulogy in 1999 is reportedly the one exception. "Those are the only prepared remarks he's ever delivered before now, to my knowledge," says his biographer Wayne Barrett. "He talks all the time about how he doesn't want to bore his audience. He's more worried about boring himself."

But he's boring himself a lot now, and it's hard not to wonder why. The man whose primary season slogan might as well have been "Trump '16: I Don't Give a Fuck" is not only carefully choosing his words now but appears panicked and indecisive, overwhelmed by his seemingly inevitable defeat.

Worse, he's sunk to the level of "strategy" to try to revive his flagging campaign, probably on the advice of some genius in the new rogues' gallery of crackpots and "alt-right" psychopaths (led by bullfrogish Breitbart chief Steve Bannon) he calls his inner circle.

And what strategy!

The Manchester crowd of sunburned white guys in jean shorts and Celtics gear looks on, mute and mystified, as Trump moves from the Clinton Foundation rant into his new "theme": Donald Trump as civil-rights champion!

The crowd whoops and hollers at first as Trump repeats the tried-and-true Republican trope that minorities are the victims of patronizing Democratic Party politics.

"Every policy Hillary Clinton supports is a policy that has failed and betrayed communities of color!" he begins, to cheers.

But the crowd grows more and more quiet as Trump lingers on the theme of black and Hispanic suffering.

"Nearly four in 10 African-American children live in poverty!" he says. "Fifty-eight percent of African-American youth are not working! More than 2,700 people have been shot in Chicago this year alone!"

And he just keeps going. There's no punchline about the failure of personal responsibility in inner-city homes, no lecture about the breakdown of two-parent families, no tirades against "free stuff." The crowd waits for a dog whistle that never blows. Instead, Trump just reads off one line after another about suffering in minority communities, almost like that's the point or something.

Trump's old stump speech was a blunt appeal to the frustrations of flyover America. It was a promise from a would-be strongman to clear out corrupt elites who, Trump said, had fattened themselves with donor cash as they shipped the regular workingman's job abroad, or handed them to minorities climbing the walls.

In places like Manchester, a moonscape of closed mills and industrial ruins, his furious "throw the bums out" speeches used to bull's-eye every audience.

But general-election Trump's new speech is like a bizarre Mad Libs exercise in which someone mass-inserted references to African-Americans where the old white-misery applause lines used to be.

In the crowd, there's slow clapping, and confusion. Finally, Trump wraps up by making a bold promise about the future under a Trump presidency.

"African-American citizens and Latino citizens," he promises, "will have the time of their life!"

What is this, the musical climax to *Dirty Dancing*? Has a stranger civil-rights speech ever been delivered?

Shortly afterward, a mumbling and bewildered crowd files out of the Radisson ballroom where the event had predictably been held (the Manchester Radisson will someday be preserved as a monument to presidential-campaign tedium). Nobody complains or anything, but a sense of letdown hangs over the whole building.

What the hell just happened? What was that speech about? Who was it for? And who kidnapped the old Donald Trump?

For most of the past year, it's been difficult to get a read on what "the Trump campaign" was thinking at any given moment, because "the Trump campaign" per se didn't exist. The campaign was basically a few overheated ganglia somewhere behind Trump's eyes.

His process was random enough that he himself often seemed surprised by the amazing things that came out of his mouth, sort of the way Eddie Van Halen used to raise an eyebrow when he thought he hit a particularly awesome note in a solo. Trump's head tilted one way, and a tirade against Macy's credit cards came out. It tilted the other way, and Trump compared El Chapo to a vacuum cleaner.

Nobody had "access" to the inner workings of that, not reporters, not his staff, and probably not even Trump himself. And yet his poll numbers kept soaring. It was the cheapest, most lightweight campaign organization ever. That he ended up securing the Republican nomination in this manner is an unsurpassable accomplishment in the history of winging it.

But eventually he reached a stage of the race where the whole enterprise simply got too big to manage entirely by whim, and that's when he got into trouble. Seat-of-pants Trump was an elusive, high-energy monstrosity, but doing-his-homework Trump was a disaster, to use one of his favorite words.

He made terrible decision after terrible decision. After spending all primary season savaging the Republican establishment, he spent the months after he sewed up the nomination alternately courting and denouncing the likes of Paul Ryan, John McCain and Kelly Ayotte.

Then, after bragging all year that he didn't need anyone's money, he suddenly started sucking up to party bigwigs and reportedly even fired his thuggish campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, at the behest of donors as well as his own children.

He replaced Lewandowski with the similarly goonish political lifer Paul Manafort – Lewandowski and Manafort both look like the kind of people you'd find smoking Pall Malls in the trailer office of a repossessed-car lot. But Trump immediately began straining against Manafort's efforts to get him to stick to scripted speeches and stop bashing other Republicans, the parents of war dead, Mexican judges and other such unsuitable targets for general-election-season abuse.

Before long, the internal tensions leaked to *The New York Times*, which in an August 13th article detailed Manafort's fruitless efforts to get Trump to focus and stop shooting himself in the face. The article naturally infuriated the candidate, who then essentially ousted Manafort and replaced him with Bannon, chief of the far-right Breitbart media empire and perhaps the only person in America with a worse reputation than Trump for hotheadedness and choleric racism.

Trump would have been better off just conceding the loss from the outset and spending the general-election season going up in flames, showing up at debates guzzling martinis and wearing a lampshade on his head, directing daily tirades at cancer kids and nuns, playing the election like an Andy Kaufman prank.

Instead, he vacillated wildly, trying in one moment to look "presidential" before reversing course seconds later to purge his staff and go on politically destructive rampages.

These manic-depressive episodes caused him to plummet in the polls and ultimately left him on the maximally absurd strategic track: trying to right the ship and win back the political middle under the direction of Bannon, an infamous idiot, extremist and Internet conspiracy theorist whose ex-wife claimed in court filings that he "didn't want [his kids] to go to school with Jews." Trump as Eliza Doolittle and Bannon as Professor Higgins is surely the dumbest casting of *Pygmalion* ever tried.

By late August, the Trump-Bannon re-brand was well underway. The most obvious efforts were in the area of walking back Trump's reputation as a "racist," a word the campaign's internal polls showed too many people associated with the candidate.

Two days before the Manchester speech, for instance, Trump surprised everyone by telling his buddy Sean Hannity in a Fox-televised town hall that he was open to a "softening" on the immigration issue. "Everybody agrees we get the bad ones out," Trump said. "But when I meet thousands and thousands of people on this subject ... they've said, 'Mr. Trump, I love you, but to take a person that has been here for 15 or 20 years and throw them and the family out, it's so tough, Mr. Trump.'"

TV audiences and journalists alike reacted in shock. Was this the same guy who plugged a return to Eisenhower's lurid "Operation Wetback" mass-deportation program last year?

The next morning, long-suffering Trump campaign spokeswoman Katrina Pierson was on TV, trying to explain. Pierson is a puzzling choice for a lead mouthpiece. She would lose at Boggle to Rob Gronkowski. She now had to reframe her candidate's apparent complete turnabout on his signature issue. To a CNN panel, Pierson said, "He hasn't changed his position on immigration. He has changed the words that he is saying."

The panel burst out laughing. Pierson tried to stay composed and brave her way through the rest of the segment, but it was like watching a kitten try to crawl out of a wood-chipper. Within moments, Pierson's tortured Orwellian construction was rocketing around the Internet, among other things inspiring thousands of Twitter jokes.

Famed swimsuit model Chrissy Teigen, for instance, acidly tweeted, "Not many of us could wake up and do what @KatrinaPierson does every day with a straight face. What an inspiration."

In a perfect mini set piece of the Trump campaign, Pierson retweeted this sarcastic tribute, thinking it a compliment. Even Trump's media expert is in a slump.

As for Trump's apparent flip-flop on immigration, it technically wasn't much of a change. As multiple observers have pointed out, Trump has all along occasionally thrown out tidbits such as "we'll keep the good ones." From the start, on this and on virtually every other issue, Trump has always tried to have it both ways.

Moreover, as Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute points out, Trump's written platform doesn't draw a hard line on the issue. "Not that Trump is the kind of guy who cares what his position paper says," Nowrasteh says, "but there's nothing in it that insists that all undocumented immigrants have to go." Nowrasteh's theory is that the "softening" story was prompted by wishful thinking on the part of mainstream Republicans who are trying to make Trump more palatable. The idea of Trump changing positions is being pushed, he says, by "groups of Republicans who want to support him but are turned off by his rhetoric."

Indeed, just days before Trump's town hall with Hannity, the candidate held a Saturday meeting at Trump Tower in New York with his newly created "Hispanic Advisory Council" of Latino Trump supporters. Bannon and campaign manager Kellyanne Conway were also at the meeting. When it was over, members of the group leaked details of the discussion to the media, in particular to BuzzFeed, which in a headline said that Trump was indicating an "openness to legalization."

Trump campaign spokesman Steven Cheung coldly dismissed the report as "clickbait journalism." But then Trump himself delivered his bizarre "softening" riff at the Hannity event, seeming to confirm BuzzFeed's report in every respect. What the hell was going on?

Nobody had a clue. Among the reporters following Trump around the country, there were only guesses. Trump's traveling press contingent is full of smart, hard-working folks but is tiny relative to campaigns past, between six and 12 reporters on a given day. This is a symbol of another missed opportunity by the Trump campaign, which not only sidelined journalists but banned some major outlets altogether.

Reporters traditionally traveled in huge numbers with the candidate and the candidate's staff, all on the same plane. Journalists drank with staffers at night and candidates periodically snuck into the press section to show a little leg. Whether it was John Kerry slinging footballs to hacks on the tarmac, George Bush giving nicknames to favored beat writers or Barack Obama posing for photos with press-section rookies, past presidential candidates made an effort to charm the media, no matter how much they secretly despised it.

If Trump were smart, he'd not only invite the press onto his plane, he'd regularly set up camp in the cheap seats with them, plying them with booze and Cuban cigars while stuffing C-notes into their shirt pockets, à la Rodney Dangerfield's Al Czervik character in *Caddyshack*. Trump is an expert schmoozer, and it's not like it costs a lot to influence the media. You can get most reporters to chill out with a beer and a box of cookies.

Charming the press was one of the few cards Trump had to play in a race that was always going to be an uphill climb. This is particularly true since the media covering Hillary Clinton have been similarly shut out.

Instead, the press not only flies in a separate plane from Trump, but flies with logistical staff only. You're well taken care of, but you see no aides, no spokespeople. There are virtually no "avails" with the candidate, and if you want a comment or a clarification, you can't just walk up the aisle. You've got to e-mail a spokesperson halfway across the country, who may or may not answer, likely because he or she doesn't know the answer either.

Thus when the immigration flip-flop blew up, the Trump press corps had no way to know what was happening. They were told that a major address on immigration was coming in the next week or so, but no one told them when that would be. The situation was so absurd that when Trump gave a speech at one stop that happened to mention E-Verify and an exit-entry tracking system, some on the bus ride wondered if that was the big unveil.

"Hey," shouted one reporter, "was that the immigration speech?"

Shrugs all around. Who the hell knew?

Saturday afternoon, August 27th, the Iowa State Fairgrounds, outside Des Moines. Trump is scheduled to make an appearance here with a host of Iowa politicians, including the state's pop-culture heroine, and noted pig castrator, Sen. Joni Ernst.

The small traveling press corps following the candidate glumly files out of a shuttle van into "Joni's Roast n' Ride," which turns out to be a mud-floored barn packed with yet another whooping-and-hollering all-white crowd dressed in biker regalia, mesh hats and flag-themed shirts.

It's a hardcore audience. Imagine the set of *Hee Haw* mixed with a Strom Thurmond rally, and you get the idea. If Colin Kaepernick walked in here by mistake, he would probably be skeletonized in seconds.

As the press files in, there is some bemused speculation as to whether or not Trump would have the stones to pull his "minority outreach" speech in this particular setting. "No way," whispers one reporter, looking around. "Not here."

When the candidate is finally introduced, he's late – he seems always to be late – and is alone. Trump rarely travels with his wife or children anymore. Stories that have surfaced about inconsistencies in Melania Trump's own immigration history have raised the specter of possible legal problems for the candidate's wife. Perhaps because of this, she's been less at his side lately.

Whatever the reason, the man who in primary season was often introduced as a beaming patriarch surrounded by adoring heir-spawn now seems sullen and diminished when he takes the stage.

In Iowa, he seems particularly off. Dressed in a blue blazer, a white button down shirt with a high open collar, and a white "Make America Great Again" ball cap pulled down practically to his eyeballs, he looks stiff and lifeless from a distance, like a Pez-dispenser version of himself.

He also looks old. It's an impression enhanced by the terrible echoing acoustics in the barn, which make him sound like a man calling out Bingo numbers at a retirement home.

"Nothing means more to me-me-me...", he begins, "than working to make our party the home of the African-American vote-vote-vote...once again-again-again...."

He goes on to give the same bizarre speech about the troubles of African-Americans he's been giving for a week already, adding a line about the shooting death in Chicago of Nykea Aldridge, the 32-year-old cousin of NBA star Dwyane Wade.

In classic Trump-like fashion, he's already in the soup on this issue. Misspelling Wade's first name, Trump had earlier tweeted, "Dwayne Wade's cousin was just shot and killed walking her baby in Chicago. Just what I have been saying. African Americans will VOTE TRUMP!"

Only Donald Trump can pivot from the murder of a beloved sports star's relative into a *Vote for me!* slogan in less than 24 hours. Not that it was a surprise: This is the same candidate who tweeted, "Appreciate the congrats for being right on Islamic terrorism," while the bodies of mass-murder victims in Orlando were still warm.

Back in the barn, Trump mentions "Dwyane Wade's cousin" again and then plunges into an even more protracted and detailed plea for the black vote. If Bernie Sanders had won the nomination and had made an attempt to change his anti-business image through a series of banker-friendly speeches delivered to undergrads at Oberlin and UC-Berkeley, it would feel something like this.

Here, Trump lays out two policy arguments for that theoretical poor inner-city African-American voter who would somehow be listening to this speech, delivered to a crowd of white bikers and farmers in an Iowa barn.

Argument one: If your life sucks already, and as a white billionaire I can only assume it does, why not try something new? "To those suffering, I say, vote for Donald Trump and I will fix it," he says. "What do you have to lose?"

Argument two is the stunner, a breathtaking attempt to pull all the irreconcilable rhetorical threads of his campaign together. "There is another civil-rights issue we need to talk about, and that's the issue of immigration enforcement," he says. "Every time an African-American citizen ... loses their job to an illegal immigrant, the rights of that American citizen have been violated."

Yes, let's build a wall, but let's do it to help African-Americans! It's alt-right meets civil rights! The best crossover hit since "Walk This Way"!

There's muted applause, but also lots of glazed eyes staring up at the stage, not knowing how to respond. Still, after the speech, a local real estate developer named Don Whitham gives Trump's African-American outreach the thumb's-up. "The Republicans took them out of slavery. And we're trying to do it again," he says. "We're trying to take 'em out of enslavement."

He adds, voice breaking with emotion, "They're just being used by the damn politicians, that's all it amounts to!"

Apart perhaps from his most hardcore fans (and the occasional *Wall Street Journal* columnist), nobody seriously believes Trump has been trying to reach out to African-American voters. If he had, he might have spoken to some actual black people, and taken a position on an issue black audiences care about.

That he ended a week of "minority outreach" speeches pulling a crisp zero percent approval rating among black voters – zero percent! – speaks to the absurdity of taking his "outreach" campaign at face value.

Instead, the consensus is that Trump's whole effort was geared toward reassuring moderate Republicans that he isn't a racist. "Bedrock level for a Republican is 45 percent – Trump is at 40 percent," says Simon Rosenberg, a longtime Democratic strategist and president of the New Democrat Network. "I can imagine Kellyanne Conway going through the numbers with him and just saying, 'Look, if you don't do something, you're looking at the biggest loss in party history.'" Basically, at this stage, Rosenberg concludes, "he's playing to avoid a blowout."

The only problem with this is, well, everything. If Trump was going to think strategically, the time to do it was from the very beginning, before he insulted menstruating women, the pope, Muslims, Mexicans, Whoopi Goldberg, Ronda Rousey, Carly Fiorina's face, Germany, and hundreds of other groups and individuals.

You do it before you do schlock impersonations of Chinese businesspeople ("We want deal!"), before you retweet a bogus meme claiming 81 percent of white homicide victims were killed by blacks (the real number is 15 percent), before you mimic people with neurological disorders, and before you suggest that gun enthusiasts might take a shot at your opponent.

And you definitely do it before you destroy the modern Republican Party by birthing into the mainstream an aggressive white-nationalist movement, whose entire identity is centered around walling itself off from America's future multicultural majority. In other words, you do it before you tear down a 162-year-old political organization to replace it with a smaller, more radicalized, more automatically-losing coalition – not after.

At the end of August, the campaign made a surprise announcement of a trip to Mexico, and following a year of unrestrained abuse of Mexicans, Trump shockingly ended up meeting with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto.

Trump spent that meeting meekly tip-toeing back a greatest-hits list of blustery primary-season remarks. Having spent all of last year promising that he would build a wall and make Mexico pay for it, he let Nieto tell him to his face that Mexico would not in fact pay for the wall. When

asked about the wall, Trump said, "We discussed the wall, we didn't discuss payment." On NAFTA, which he promised to scrap in an effort to restore American jobs, Trump now promised only to keep jobs "in our hemisphere." Then the man who said Mexico was sending killers and rapists over the border on purpose called it a "great honor" to be invited to the presidential residence by Nieto, whom he described as a "friend."

Trump won the nomination by being the cruelest, most balls-out build-a-wall hard-liner. Now he was talking like Jeb Bush on immigration and Bill Clinton on NAFTA. What was the point of all that craziness and rancor and destruction? Who needs Donald Trump playing Jeb Bush, especially since the actual Jeb Bush might have had a chance of beating Hillary Clinton?

Then Trump zoomed up to Arizona and finally gave his "big immigration speech," doubling down on his most extreme rhetoric as if he hadn't just been south of the border, prostrating himself before the Mexican president. "Mexico will pay for the wall," he boomed. "A hundred percent. They don't know it yet, but they're going to pay for it."

He added a new plan to create "safe zones" in the Middle East (to be paid for by Persian Gulf countries, of course) for relocating Muslims turned back by "extreme vetting." The rollout was an immediate hit with former Klan leader David Duke, who called it "an excellent speech."

The Bannon-Trump plan appears to be to run simultaneously as a statesman and a nationalist lunatic. Either they're trying to drive their numbers down to zero as part of a kinky performance-art scheme, or the campaign is in complete chaos.

"The thing is, virtually every politician who runs for office for the first time loses," says Rosenberg. "These rich guys don't realize how nuanced a game it is. In their business, you get 10 percent margins, you're a huge success. In our business, you need 51 percent margins. It's tough. And they don't get it until it's too late."

The presidential campaign is the ultimate exploration of self. If you make it as far as the general election, you become one of the most analyzed personalities on Earth. Merciless reporters track down every relative, business partner, love interest and enemy you ever had, and pundits and armchair psychiatrists alike scrutinize every sentence you utter.

Making it to victory requires an unshakeable inner confidence beyond the capacity of most people. Most politicians get around this by being walking sales pitches instead of people, appearing as two-dimensional cardboard cutouts representing slates of party positions, their personalities merely serving as idiosyncratic background to the corporate presentation. In times of crisis, they can cling to the party line.

Trump is different. He ran as a party-smasher, a man among elitist mice, a traitor to the establishment who came down from corrupt Olympus to save the common people. "I know the game better than anyone," he told crowds. "I've been on the other side."

As a salacious high-velocity burn on a corrupted campaign process, he was initially a brilliant, if repulsive, success. He charged through the primary season like a pig on strychnine and won the nomination not because of who he was, but what he wasn't: a politician.

Therefore, uniquely perhaps in the history of presidential candidates, Trump's success hinged on his ability to stay true to himself. The promise of his campaign was Trump the man, all day, every day. If his voters wanted a politician, or even a non-politician who thought before he spoke, they'd have chosen one. Who could have foreseen we'd end up with the one thing more ridiculous than Donald Trump running for president: Donald Trump running for president and trying to be smart about it.