



Tempest in a Mall? Not really

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“Why care about the crowd size on the Mall for an inauguration, and whether Trump’s was the biggest ever? Why make Sean Spicer’s press conference about it a big story?” Good question. Here’s my answer.

I’m one who agrees in not caring about the issue on a first approach. Does the size of an inaugural crowd has any relation to how well a President will govern? Not that I can see. What’s more, Friday’s event drew a very big audience both in person and in domestic viewership, more than respectable, even if not as big as Reagan I and Obama I. Trump could reasonably point out that more of his strongest followers live far from DC and may not have means to travel for a Friday midday event. TV viewership ratings become ever less certain with Internet viewing, especially the large audience outside the US. In short, I don’t think the White House would have gotten in trouble with fair-minded observers had it simply used the facts, rather than, as they soon became infamously known, “alternative facts.”

So why’d the story blow up?

1) Trump himself cares greatly about this issue, enough to spend a lot of energy on it. That tells us something about him. Some report him as thinking the dispute implicates his very legitimacy, and some of his supporters online have woven theories of deliberate press misconduct, such as misrepresenting when aerial photos were taken, although photos with times noted or taken in sequence, such as [those posted by PBS](#), appear to confirm that the Friday crowd fell well short of that drawn by Obama in 2009.

2) Many of us who didn’t care to begin with have been drawn into the issue by the White House’s willingness to assert untruths so confidently about it. It’s an issue on which several types of evidence (photographic, eyewitness accounts from experienced crowd estimators, Washington subway usage, and, on the claims about remote viewership, published broadcast ratings) could immediately be brought to bear to show the White House was playing fast and loose with the truth.

3) Every White House lies on at least some issues involving state secrets, national security, and foreign relations. Most also lie or shade the truth about some other high-stakes controversies (“If you like your plan, you can keep your plan.”) But why lie on **this** issue?

4) In telling lies, it is normal human behavior to tell ones that skirt falsification rather than ones that contradict what listeners just heard or saw with their own eyes. Even children learn this difference from an early age. One hopes it never becomes a test of loyalty to a government to

accept lies at all, but especially not the second kind of lie. If it does, loyalty is being stretched rather far.

5) The timing matters. Many observers have taken a wait-and-see, give-him-a-chance approach on Trump because it is common for candidates to lie (or slime their opponents, or behave badly in other ways) during campaigns and then curb this misbehavior once they are in office. A breezy and entire disregard for factual accuracy was one of the biggest, if not the single biggest, problem with Trump as a campaigner. So for those who were waiting and seeing, one of the biggest open questions was whether he'd knock it off with the untruths once in office.

A follow-up press conference by Spicer got far better reviews for candor and plausibility. So let's hope the first impression isn't going to be the one to set the tone.

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