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How CPAC Helped Launch Donald Trump's Political Career

His first speech at the conservative conference was a sign of things to come.

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Donald Trump was nearing the end of his speech at the 2011 Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington, D.C., a political coming out of sorts for the reality television star, when a group of Ron Paul supporters suddenly began shouting the former Texas congressman's name.

"By the way," Trump responded, "Ron Paul cannot get elected, I'm sorry to tell you."

The room erupted. Paul's supporters sprang to the defense of their beloved libertarian presidential candidate by angrily booing Trump. Most of the other attendees cheered Trump on. A newbie at the conference, Trump hung back on the lectern for a few moments, smirked, and then, in typical fashion, decided to kick the hornet's nest once more for good measure.

"I like Ron Paul, I think he's a good guy — but honestly, he has just zero chance of getting elected. You have to win an election," he said, reveling in the next round of boos from the Paul crowd.

The moment was, in retrospect, critical in Trump's political ascent. He had flirted with running for president before. And at that point, he was no stranger to stirring the proverbial pot, having already spent weeks smearing President Barack Obama with lies about his birthplace. But as Trump stepped onstage on Feb. 10, 2011, the question was not whether he'd lose the schtick, but how it would play with the audience.

He got the answer he craved.

"That was pretty significant, actually," said Walter Olson, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute's Center for Constitutional Studies. "The conservative movement, its institutions and press, really were consistently resistant to Trump for a long time. They didn't write about him seriously or

treat him as a serious figure. But his appearance at CPAC was an important breach in that general wall of disdain and lack of interest.”

The line from CPAC’s 2011 gathering to the Trump White House is not straight. Trump would be publicly humiliated a few weeks later at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner. He would contemplate and then abandon a run for the White House in 2012. And he would sputter at various points during his 2016 primary bid and general election campaign.

Through it all, however, Trump maintained the combative, braggadocious style he displayed onstage in 2011, a style that made him fundamentally different than any other national Republican and one that proved unexpectedly alluring.

“That’s when I started to realize this was a different person,” said Lisa De Pasquale, the former director of CPAC who brought Trump onstage during that conference.

Six years after that gathering, Trump returns to CPAC this week a more triumphant politician, but one who is, in tone and substance, much the same. “Hail to The Chief” has replaced the “Celebrity Apprentice” theme song as his entrance music. But the same lines continue to pepper his speeches.

In his 14-minute long talk at CPAC in 2011, Trump lamented that America was becoming the “laughingstock of the world.” He accused U.S. leaders of being “weak and ineffective.” He called for “fair trade” and criticized China for manipulating its currency. In his distinctive style, he bragged about his wealth and business accomplishments, arguing that America needed a successful outsider like him to shake up Washington.

“A little different, right? A little different from what you’ve been hearing?” he asked the audience.

Even then, Trump preferred to improvise. De Pasquale recalled seeing the single sheet of paper that Trump brought with him to the stage that day, containing only a few bullet points.

“I remember seeing just ‘China’ written on the paper,” she said.

Trump didn’t wing it entirely. He shrewdly picked issues — abortion, guns and Obamacare — to appeal to the GOP base, earning standing ovations when he pledged his conservative orthodoxy on these matters. The crowd (at least the non-Ron Paul-supportive elements of it) ate it up, while out in the halls there was palpable buzz.

“That’s when I knew he could be elected president,” said Sam Nunberg, who would go on to work for Trump after seeing him at the 2011 CPAC. “I was just there. When I saw him walking through the lobby, I had never seen anything like that before, the paparazzi following him.”

Trump almost didn’t make it to CPAC that year. The gay-conservative group GOProud, which was waging its own battles with conference organizers, initially invited him. GOProud got its long-sought wish to be included as a sponsor for the yearly confab in 2011, much to the chagrin of social conservatives, several of whom decided to boycott.

In making arrangements for that year's gathering, GOProud's former chairman Chris Barron thought of the idea of getting Trump to attend. He reached out to Roger Stone, Trump's longtime confidant, about the possibility. They collectively agreed to the idea.

"He was interesting and exciting and reflected an outside-of-the-box approach," said Barron. "When Trump walked into the building, it was like Michael Jackson coming out of a Japanese airport. There were throngs of people around him," he added. "From the moment when he walked into the door, I knew this was different."

Stone did not return a request for comment.

At that point, it wasn't clear to Barron or others how well Trump would fit in with the crowd, which often includes the party's most impassioned activists and young students from around the country. Though he was a vocal, conspiratorial Obama critic, Trump maintained socially liberal viewpoints, including a general support for gay rights. GOProud's own experience showed how complicated that could be at CPAC's gatherings.

But Trump had also calculated that simply being there was as important as trying to sand down his rough edges. And David Keene, the former CPAC director and chairman of the American Conservative Union, said that calculus earned Trump plaudits from a critical constituency.

"The mere fact of showing up ultimately makes you more acceptable, because being nice to people and talking to them beats the hell out of calling them names," said Keene, who left his CPAC post the year prior to Trump's appearance. "Though he does both."

For De Pasquale, it was a pivotal moment, showing that Trump could appeal to the party's broadly different elements with a sui generis form of Republicanism.

"Here's a person who's willing to expand the party, the movement. Him being accepting to gays ... is one of the biggest reasons why I thought young conservatives would accept him," she said.

Trump returned to speak at CPAC three more times: in 2013, 2014 and 2015. He used his foundation to donate tens of thousands of dollars to the American Conservative Union Foundation, the nonprofit arm of the group that organizes CPAC.

In 2016, Trump pulled out of the event but said he looked forward to returning the next year. "Hopefully," he said, "as president of the United States."