

Washington Post  
Interview with Alfonse D'Amato

[Pleasantries]

Robert Samuels: I've been at the *Post* for five years, and I'm working on the presidential campaign here. Let me tell you a little bit about how I think you might be able to help us. As you probably know, there's a group of us here. We're working on a biography of Donald Trump. I'm responsible for writing a little bit about his maturation as a political figure. I'm a feature writer by trade so I really like hearing old stories, anecdotes, and anything that might have stood out to you over the years. But I guess we could start with you talking a little bit about when you first met Donald Trump and what your impressions were.

Alfonse D'Amato: Well, I really have gotten to know Donald, I mean I knew him when I was in the Senate. I did a number of fundraising events at his facilities. But it was a passing kind of acquaintance. It was when I lost and was out of office that I had time for the first time to kind of go down to Florida on weekends. One thing led to another, and I would find myself on occasion -- well, he asked me to look at something on his behalf. It was an environmental thing having to do with one of his golf clubs. I did a little work for him where he attempted to deal with an environmental problem. I didn't

charge him anything, but we developed a relationship. I soon found myself on occasion when I would go down to Florida hitching a ride with him.

My then girlfriend, who is now my wife, Katuria and I, on a number of occasions, generally early Friday afternoon, we'd hop on his plane with him and go on down. I would say more often than not we flew back commercially, but on some occasions we fly back together and I found those to be most enjoyable times. Whether it was watching old movies and doing critiques on them, and whether it was doing crossword puzzles which my wife loves to do and Donald was terrific at it, or when I was just chatting about the events of the day or what he was doing, it was always very, very pleasant.

I never thought that he would go into politics. And indeed, when he started his race, I thought it would be basically for publicity. There is nobody who can generate publicity like Donald, and so I thought what this was was just a false state [sounds like]. You know, I'll start. Because he had done it in the past and that when it came time to file your first financial disclosures, that he would [indiscernible] that situation and would not go forward. So I was really surprised when he continued and he filed those papers. That showed me that, of course, he was beginning to build up some energy behind that.

I have endorsed Kasich because to be quite honest with you, I didn't think he was serious. And I think many people didn't think he was serious. So at one point he said to me, "Alfonse, why did you do Kasich?" I said, "Well, number one, you've got to win in Ohio if you're a Republican because no presidential candidate running as a Republican has ever won unless he carries Ohio. Number 2, I know John from the time. He was a very confident guy. And number 3, I really didn't think that you were serious about this."

Robert Samuels: What did he say?

Alfonse D'Amato: Well, at one point, not just then, he understood it. I said, "Donald, let me ask you." At what point, I can't tell you exactly but it was I would say he became the number one. He wasn't the obvious winner but he had come to the top. I said to him, "Did you really think you would go this far?" And he kind of said that he would think this would -- he said no. And so I was surprised. I think he found himself surprised. I think he found that this was for real. He was in. Once he got that, I had to tell you he had a bit in his mouth and he was serious about it.

Of course, I think he found that most of the political experts at every turn, even some of his statements that one would consider over the top and that most politicians or many of them would have found that a death knell with him. He was able

to overcome them with a degree of ease. I cite, for example, when he had said about John McCain not being a hero and that the people out there who on the frontline or words to that effect who were battling, they weren't the heroes. And I said to myself, oh, my gosh, this is fatal. But it wasn't. It wasn't by no means.

Robert Samuels: I'm going to jump in here for a little bit, if that's okay. When did you ask him did you really think he'd go this far? Was that when the first polls came out or after Iowa or what?

Alfonse D'Amato: I would say when he came to the top, and he came to the top rather quickly. It was maybe six, or seven, or eight weeks into this thing. And after, he has spoken to me as to why. I thought we were friends, and we were. I consider Donald a friend and a very smart guy. Make no mistake about it. Sometimes the language that he uses isn't the best choice to make known his views as it relates. I agree with him on the policy that we have to have a coherent strong policy dealing with stopping illegal entry into this country for a number of reasons - for the security of the country, for the safety of the country, to make it even more difficult for the drug flow into this country, and for the economic policies and because we should not be by way of not enforcing laws which haven't been enforced for 40 years.

We go back to Ronald Reagan. I voted for the bill that said, all right, about five million people, we would give them a pathway to legalizaiton. It was an implied promise that we would do better at the borders, and we never did and the following administration - Democrat, Republican, Democrat after administration.

Now it has come to the point, and I think that's why he struck a chord with people notwithstanding, he made some remarks in terms of Mexicans, rapists, et cetera. I don't think he meant to say all Mexicans -- I know he didn't mean that to say that. That's the kind of thing that hurts him, but if people were more willing to be accepting because they understood that underneath this was the fact that criminal aliens are coming here. The criminal aliens who are convicted are released back out on the streets, that they create mayhem, that this is inappropriate. He's not saying and he never meant to say that Mexicans are rapists or all of them are rapists because it's not true.

Robert Samuels: Senator, I'd like to go back a little bit to the beginning, if we may, about the fundraising events that you'd have at his properties.

Alfonse D'Amato: At his property in New York, at the Trump Towers, we had a great event there. John Hynes hosted the event. Well, I mean a number of senators did when I was running

for reelection in 1986. Then I went to his wedding. I went to two of his weddings, the famous one where Hillary was there at Mar-a-Lago with my wife. We were married then. And probably, if we didn't have our two little babies, I would have continued to fly down to Florida with him on occasion. But that changes your lifestyle when you got two little infants, and we have not made it down there in quite a while.

Robert Samuels: How did that come about? Did you ask for the fundraisers to be held there or did he suggest them?

Alfonse D'Amato: I think it was a mutual kind of thing. I think our people were looking for a venue and he was very gracious and permitted it to take place.

Robert Samuels: Did he charge you guys?

Alfonse D'Amato: Oh, I think he charged us something. I don't think it was -- under the rules, you have to, whatever, an in-kind contribution or not. So I'm not sure as to that. My people, the people who ran the campaign and the finance people took care of that. But I'm certain that there was some financial consideration. And it was a very successful fund.

And so it developed and I would on occasion join him and his family at Mar-a-Lago for dinner when his dad was alive. And even on some occasions, we would have dinner there.

In any event, he was always very gracious. We never really got into -- I never heard him express an interest in running for

office. He shared with me on occasions that -- we thought we could be doing better. He was frustrated by the drugs pouring into this country and he knew I had taken an interest in this. I used to do some battle with Sam Nunn because I thought we should use the military, and Sam Nunn said [indiscernible] not allowed to use it. I said we've got tens of thousands of people in the military who are doing little if anything but training. What better training than to have them on the board to help with this horrific problem?

I had always -- I gave President Bush the first one. I would go in to see him, [indiscernible] related to the Mexican border permitting a huge flows of drugs coming in. I just thought it was terrible. And the fact of the matter is it's worse now.

Robert Samuels: That's really interesting about the drugs issue. Did he ever talk to you about anything else, like any other sort of policy or issue with the country that he was concerned about?

Alfonse D'Amato: He talked to me about the drug epidemic and he was concerned about it. He had indicated to me that he was supportive of my positions. Well, we weren't talking about a wall then, but he's supported the use of troops on the border. And the other area, he thought that we could do much better in the housing situation and how come it was costing us so much

money to build a unit and that the cost were extraordinary. He thought he could do a heck of a lot better than the government programs. He happened to be right. Some of these units cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to build for a unit.

Robert Samuels: Was he talking about low income housing or what? Or just housing in general?

Alfonse D'Amato: Yeah, low income housing that would cost hundreds of thousands, he thought he could do it for less, and then, of course, he demonstrated I thought quite convincingly. My dear friend at the time, Ben Koch, the mayor of New York, he built the Wollman Rink, the facility over there and brought it in. He said I'll do it because it cost the city over at Central Park and it cost them a fortune that it was years delayed, et cetera. I think he went in, and if my memory serves me, I'm getting a little older now, he did an incredible job, brought it in below -- for less and finished that rink for. I think that gave him a taste. I really think that was saying that he could do things. He would look at them and say how come it costs you guys so much money? How come you can't do this?

And that rink was a perfect example. They probably, if you talk to him, it was one of the transforming things that he undertook and said I can do something in the government that these guys can't, and that if he gets something done and he did it. He and the mayor did not wind up as good friends as a

result of that, but I always thought that he had done a terrific job. He really did.

And so I like Donald. I think he's a good person. I think that he's maturing as a politician. I don't think that he's going to become nor should he become the typical politician. And by the way, when people say, well, tell me how, what would you do when you're going to take on ISIS. Tell me what you're - - well, he's absolutely right. Even if you had a specific plan, you wouldn't spell it out. He wouldn't spell it out. But I think what he's saying is I will bring in the best. I will bring in the military and commanders. I will bring in people who know the region and who understand the ramifications when we undertake action. And I will pursue it and I won't neglect these things on the altar of political expedience.

What you see today is too much of this political expedience, and it backfires when indeed Obama was warned about ISIS from the Irish general. Flynn I think his name was, who was the head of the IDA [sic] or the deputy. What did he do? He disregarded it and a year later, when it came up, he said, well, they're the junior league. I mean, that's because he was not giving sufficient support or credence to the warnings that the military were giving him.

With Trump, you'll find that he takes the kind of action that a situation requires. But you don't spell it out. And

he's absolutely right so he gets criticized for that. But if people were to think about it, he's right. You don't say what I would do to North Korea, I'll do X, Y, and Z. He said if I sat down with them, I would negotiate. Tell me what would you do. Well, there's a whole plethora of things.

Robert Samuels: Senator, I know your time is valuable. But we have a few more questions that we need to get through.

Alfonse D'Amato: Yeah, you don't want to hear my thoughts.

Robert Samuels: Did he ever talk to you about running for office?

Alfonse D'Amato: Never.

Robert Samuels: I mean before the presidency. Never?

Alfonse D'Amato: No, no. When he made his first brush, he didn't come to me. Instead he was going to do what he did. And then shortly thereafter, he dropped out. I think this time, when he got in, everybody saw Bush as the presumptive favorite and that Donald Trump didn't have an iota of a chance. But he got into this race. He threw a couple of punches. And guess what? Bush basically collapsed. And I think that he did not really anticipate that taking place. And when we asked him, I think he was surprised. He went from no place, to 2 percent, to up to 4, to up to 8, up to 12, up to 20. And then people were, oh, well, but still.

And I warned -- no, I didn't warn. But in a number of my columns, I said I recall in 1980 when people - and we have short memories - were assailing, particularly those in New York, Ronald Reagan. He's an actor. What does he know? Now, of course, Ronald Reagan did have the experience as a governor, but he was derided. The media derided him. Our party derided him. And I said once momentum starts, they can gather a movement. It's very hard as the movement begins to go along to stop it.

I did a couple of articles that, you know, you could look him up and find him in that. And that's exactly what happened. It became a movement that the so-called political elite or the power brokers, and they're a bunch of baloney. Do you think they're really a bunch of power brokers? They have groups that were able to raise money and they call themselves the power brokers. Right?

Robert Samuels: Right.

Alfonse D'Amato: But the Bush's had people who could raise money, and that's supposed to be the political elite, and everybody's supposed to roll over for them. But he went into character Trump who says little or no energy. They began saying maybe he's right --

Robert Samuels: It's interesting how simple it became. On a different topic, were you at Fred Trump's funeral? Did you attend the funeral of his father?

Alfonse D'Amato: Yes, I went to Fred's funeral.

Robert Samuels: Tell me a little bit about what you remember of that.

Alfonse D'Amato: Yes, I went to Fred's funeral. He was very, very respectful to his father, as he should've been, but he was tremendously respectful. And his father, let me tell you, supported him when - well, this is funny - when the chips were down if you recall that incident. Do you know what I'm talking about?

Robert Samuels: No, I don't.

Alfonse D'Amato: Well, reportedly he was having some financial difficulties at the casino, and that Fred - and this was reported - reportedly took \$15 million worth of chips, bought \$15 million worth of chips. And so daddy is there for his son. And he was. And his father was a fabulous builder. Really well-respected, Fred Trump.

Robert Samuels: Did you remember anything that Donald said during the funeral?

Alfonse D'Amato: Well, they downplayed the whole thing because I don't know whether or not Casino laws in New Jersey would have permitted such a thing. But it was reported. I don't know the truth or the falsity of it. I suspect that there was more than a kernel of truth there. My point is they were very close. Fred Trump, in fairness to his son, did not try to

micromanage it. That is obvious because Donald had a different thing, a different flair. And, of course, when he built the renaissance of the hotel, it was really quite something. Right next to Grand Central Station, that really was a great mark. And that was all Donald, the Grand Hyatt. I mean the Great Hyatt, it was a great achievement on his part.

Robert Samuels: When you consider the Donald Trump that you knew - I guess it was about 30 years ago when you first had that fundraiser - to the man you know now, do you think anything about him, his persona, has changed that made him more suitable for politics?

Alfonse D'Amato: I think if anything --

Robert Samuels: Hello? [Line was cut - 25:55 to 26:31]  
So the last thing was I asked you if you thought over time in knowing him whether or not he became more suited for politics.

Alfonse D'Amato: Well, I think since the day he entered the race and now, there has been quite a change. I think he takes his time much more. I think he's going to continue to improve. I think it's not a change in him but in the manner in which he articulates his positions, I think it will become clearer. He will be more accustomed to the give and take and will become less upset to the kinds of questions that are sometimes not only very challenging but go beyond what in the

normal day-to-day life people endure or people don't have to endure.

But when you are in politics, whether it's your opponent or whether it's the media, there's a constant struggle and testing. And how you deal with that takes some time, and he's getting better at it. There's no doubt that he's able to articulate his positions today much better than three months ago or four months ago when he first really started this.

Robert Samuels: There's been those times when you were with him at Mar-a-Lago or with him on the plane. Lots of people have wondered about his switching of political parties, from Republican to Independent to Democrat. Have you noticed any differences in his political thinking over time?

Alfonse D'Amato: Well, I don't think he's ever really thought out some of the positions that he is forced to articulate or speak about today.

Robert Samuels: Like what?

Alfonse D'Amato: Well, on the issue of abortion, on the issues of gun control, on some of those things, the nitty-gritty that politics calls upon, on the transgender question. I don't even know what his position is on that. I think it's ridiculous that we're making this a national thing. It's a lot of nonsense. And that, by the way, is why people like him - because he's willing to call certain things a lot of nonsense.

I mean, this should be on national debate. We don't have more important things for the president and nation's leaders to be embark on? Maybe there should be a number one on our parties' platform, whether you're a Democrat or Republican. It's nonsense.

So he will become more steeped in handling some of these things which are really you have to have some nuances to it.

Robert Samuels: This has been really great. I'm going to reserve the right to call you back one of these days if something else comes up because I feel you've done us a really huge favor here, and I appreciate that.

Alfonse D'Amato: I'm very happy to help. When do you think this article is going to come to fruition?

Robert Samuels: Well, you know, I mean this is a part of a book.

Alfonse D'Amato: A project.

Robert Samuels: Yeah. The book is due in June. We might do some articles beforehand. So sometime between now and August is the -- that's the ballpark I can give you.

Alfonse D'Amato: Okay. Any time I can be of help, you call. I'd talk it to you.

Robert Samuels: Thanks a lot. Thank you, Senator. Bye.