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THE DAILY

# JEFFREY, WHO? A PLANE RIDE WITH DONALD TRUMP

By Mark Singer

November 19, 2025



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**At work on a Profile** of the then struggling real-estate mogul Donald Trump, Mark Singer took a plane ride with him and Ghislaine Maxwell, who called up a friend named Jeffrey. For decades, the scene stuck in Singer's mind. Plus:



Ghislaine Maxwell and Donald Trump, in October of 1997. Photograph by Richard Corkery / NY Daily News Archive / Getty

## Mark Singer

*A staff writer at the magazine since 1974.*

**Since I began** writing Profiles for *The New Yorker*, fifty years ago, my preferred subjects have been non-celebrities, people who for whatever reason interested me and, ideally, had been written about rarely, if ever. Reporting a condensed biography of a living person tends to be quite intrusive, involving many hours of one-on-one interviewing and fly-on-the-wall observation. That a subject and I were not friends didn't mean that our interactions should feel stilted or adversarial.

Occasionally, I felt the need to protect a subject from himself. In the mid-eighties, I wrote about an art dealer who by his early thirties had become internationally well-known as a relentlessly competitive trader in antique atlases and maps, rare books, engraved prints, and eventually much more. He once invited me to accompany him to a meeting with a highly valued client provided that I pose as his employee. "Well, then, don't come," he said when I declined. "I understand. It's a shame, though. You'd get to see me when I'm really excited." The day the Profile was published, he called and said, "Unfortunately, you're a really good writer. As I was reading, I thought, Gee, am I truly this much of an asshole, and realized, yeah, I probably am."

Only once did I undertake a piece knowing full well that the result was unlikely to flatter. It never would've occurred to me to write about Donald Trump—who, for starters, interested me not at all—but when the assignment landed on my desk, in the fall of 1996, I lacked the leverage to refuse. I'd spent much of the previous four years—two more than I'd anticipated—writing a book about someone who, I'd come to recognize, was a pathological liar and worse. One benefit of being lied to point-blank, at least, is that it can be a wonderful motivator, and across the years some of my most gratifying moments as a reporter have been spent with incorrigible dissemblers.

With Trump, I understood that my intelligence per se wasn't being insulted by the self-aggrandizing fictions that burbled from his lips; that was just the way the man spoke. I asked questions, listened carefully, and knew that my generally affable demeanor made no difference to Trump, who no doubt regarded me as a tool and otherwise a nonentity. This was the pre-“Apprentice” Trump, his Atlantic City casinos struggling, his real-estate assets diminished, and his creditworthiness shredded by his cavalier overreaching and the shameless stiffing of his lenders. Naturally, he denied responsibility for his adversity and, in any event, insisted that he was making a comeback. I needed to understand how he conducted his business, how he managed to stay afloat in the wake of his serial bankruptcies. One possibility that never occurred to me in those days, to my everlasting regret, was that this prevaricating megalomaniac might someday blow up the Constitution.

On (who knew?) President's Day weekend in 1997, I met Trump at Teterboro Airport, where we boarded a somehow-still-in-his-possession 727 jet for a trip to Mar-a-Lago, his faux-exclusive private club in Palm Beach. Given that I've never reported from a war zone or the site of a natural disaster in its immediate aftermath, I suppose it's unseemly to brag that my three days at Mar-a-Lago were among the coldest of that winter in Florida. Having brought the wrong clothes, when I wasn't accompanying Trump on the lawn as he drove golf balls into the Intracoastal Waterway, being shown around the spa, watching a pay-per-view junior-welterweight boxing match with him and Marla Maples, or getting a house tour from his butler, I spent as much time as I could in my thousand-dollar-a-night suite, huddled under the bedcovers in fetal position.

In retrospect, the most memorable event of the weekend turned out to have been the flight down from New York. Besides Trump and me, the passenger list included his then thirteen-year-old son, Eric; an attorney named Eric Javits; a Trump bodyguard built like a stacked cord of wood; and a smiling Ghislaine Maxwell. (I had a parallel experience later that winter, when I flew by helicopter with Trump for a quick visit to his most

underperforming Atlantic City casino. When it came time to chopper back to Manhattan, a few hours later, the leading edge of a snowstorm had arrived. Also on board was Vanna White, the “Wheel of Fortune” doyenne who subsequently was listed in the Guinness World Records as television’s “most frequent clapper”—3.7 million times. Unnerved by the potentially perilous flying conditions, I ruminated about the pilot as we idled on the helipad: Is he famous? If we go down, do I get third or fourth billing in the list of casualties?)

During the flight to Palm Beach, I sat in the front of the plane, where Eric, at his father’s behest, fast-forwarded through “Bloodsport,” the Jean-Claude Van Damme martial-arts free-for-all, to eliminate all plot exposition. I no longer recall the specifics of Trump’s monologue along the way or my efforts to keep it coming. As we were about to land, Maxwell made a call on her cellphone—still a relatively rare consumer commodity in those days—and Trump joined in on the conversation by shouting from the front of the plane. They were speaking with a mutual friend named Jeffrey—no surname—in a tone that came across as knowing and intimate in an inside-joke way, but opaque. Repeatedly, Trump addressed Jeffrey by name, and Maxwell, the interlocutor, whose default mode struck me as preprogrammed conviviality, seemed amused by all of it. She and Trump plainly shared *something*, but it was strictly between them and Jeffrey. By then, I’d spent enough time observing and reporting about Trump to conclude that he had no true friends, the sine qua non for a lasting, loving relationship being the ability to subordinate one’s needs to another’s. I once asked Trump whether he considered himself ideal company and got back, “You really want to know what I consider ideal company? A total piece of ass.”

Why did “Jeffrey” take root in my memory long after other details of the weekend had faded? Even if I’d heard the name “Epstein,” it would’ve meant nothing to me. It was because I’d had a glimpse into something that seemed suggestive and worth knowing but minus any elucidating context that it lodged in my brain, subliminal but retrievable. It would be more than twenty years before I had an inkling of what that something was.

**For more:** [read “Trump Solo,” Mark Singer’s Profile from 1997.](#)

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*Our Culture Picks*

- **Read:** Malcolm Cowley’s memoir, “Exile’s Return,” depicts his time living in France alongside the not-yet-famous writers Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein.
- **Watch:** Pauline Kael called it when she wrote that “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”—which turns fifty today—would join the ranks of such pop-mythology films as “Rebel Without a Cause” and “Easy Rider.”
- **Listen:** “No private car, no caviar / No carpet on my floor / Still I’ve got plenty to be thankful for,” Bing Crosby sings. “Someone to adore / How could anybody ask for more?” A good Thanksgiving anthem.

## Daily Cartoon

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*“I’m you from the future, where your fate is entirely decided by the whims of a few billionaires whom you’ll never meet, so I don’t really have anything to tell you, advice-wise!”*

Cartoon by Will McPhail

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**P.S. The Trump Administration** plans to lend a billion dollars to help restart work on the nuclear-power plant on Three Mile Island, in Pennsylvania. You may remember the place from its radioactive meltdown, in 1979. ✨

*Hannah Jocelyn contributed to today's edition.*

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