

Washington Post
Interview with John O'Donnell,
Former President Trump Plaza Casino & Hotel
May 2, 2016

Michael Kranish: So I'm here with John O'Donnell just so I remember.

John O'Donnell: ... Well, my dad really was the founder of Bally Manufacturing. A lot of people give somebody else credit for it. Well, let me back up. My father worked, in his younger years, for a company called Lion Manufacturing. And Lion Manufacturing built vending machines. It did some level of amusement machines. But predominantly, they had a lot of patents in the vending area. And the company was owned by a family called the Moloney family. Ray Moloney was the founder of Lion. And my dad was kind of next in command. He worked himself up. Ray, interesting enough, had a horrible problem with alcohol. And my dad really wound up being his right hand man. He was really running that business.

Well, after Ray Moloney died, the other family members, they basically took Lion Manufacturing. They didn't want it anymore and they started selling off the patents for money. So they sold the patents to this, to that. And the plant, the manufacturing plant in Chicago basically shut down. The bank took it over. And my dad was kind of there as the overseeing, watching the property while the bank is trying to sell it. And

so my dad has this concept that he wanted to restart the business. And so he went out and raised the money to buy the building from the bank. And he enticed some of the engineers to come back. He had three other partners that he went out and found. And he wound up reopening what was Lion Manufacturing under the name Bally.

So yes, what used to be Lion went down to nothing. Nobody was there and nothing was happening. And my dad reopened it as Bally. And then he took the company, got out of the vending side, did amusements with pinball machines, bingo machines, and then he added slot machines as well. Those are the machines that we made. And it's kind of history, the slot machine that they developed was really the first reliable electromechanical device where all of the slot machines in Nevada were just mechanical. They had no electronics in them. The old Jennings and the Mills machines, they were just purely mechanical. No electricity. And the Bally machine was the first machine that had a combination of both electrical and mechanical. So it was the first electromechanical slot machine. And it really changed the industry.

And so, they took it to Nevada. And at one point, the state of Nevada went from all one type of machine to Bally was 90 percent of the market. All of Nevada was Bally machines.

Michael Kranish: You grew up with the idea of slot machines in your family?

John O'Donnell: Well, it was in there. It was part of my childhood. I mean, it's really probably not significant for this. But I mean my childhood was slightly split because my birthparents died when I was young. And I was actually adopted into this family when I was in 8th grade, when I was 12 years old. I was adopted into this, the family that owned Bally. And they adopted --

Michael Kranish: Did he adopt him?

John O'Donnell: He was my uncle. Bill O'Donnell, who I just described, started Bally, he was my uncle. And then when my parents died, my aunt and uncle, they adopted all five of the kids from our family. So when I was adopted, I had two older sisters and I had two younger brothers. We ranged from -- my youngest brother was in first grade and my oldest sister was a senior in high school. And then Bill and Nikki O'Donnell, my aunt and uncle, they adopted all five of us.

Michael Kranish: So the purpose of this, they're your parents?

John O'Donnell: Oh, they are. I mean, we don't even talk about it any other way. We were that close before and we were that close after.

Michael Kranish: What happened to your parents?

John O'Donnell: Well, my dad died when I was eight. He died of a complication from surgery, actually, where they actually left something inside of him, he got infected, and it killed him. And then my mom died when I was 12 of cancer, breast cancer. I'm a blessed individual, trust me. People hear this story and it's part of my story. But I'm blessed because I was never not loved. I never had that -- like the day that my mom died, I asked the question, "Am I going to be able to stay with my brothers and sisters?" And the answer was, "Absolutely, yes. You will never be separated from your brothers and sisters." And so I was blessed that way and that doesn't happen to a lot of people.

Michael Kranish: So your birth parents were O'Donnells too?

John O'Donnell: Yes, yes.

Michael Kranish: Okay. It's just something that I --

John O'Donnell: Yeah, yeah.

Michael Kranish: It's just so striking that I might want to mention it in a phrase.

John O'Donnell: Yeah. It was the two fathers.

Michael Kranish: They're brothers.

John O'Donnell: Yeah, they were brothers. And actually, both my dads worked at Bally at one point.

Michael Kranish: As a kid, did you go in and you run slot machines growing up and so forth?

John O'Donnell: Well, I wasn't really around slot machines so much. But I did start working in -- I worked summer jobs at the factory when I was in high school.

Michael Kranish: In Chicago?

John O'Donnell: Yeah. As soon as I was old enough, I worked at what they called the parts department.

Michael Kranish: Were there making slot machines or was this before the slot machines

John O'Donnell: No. They were making slot machines. But I worked in the parts department where the suppliers of pinball machines, slot machines, whatever, things would break, right? And there was parts. So we pulled parts, packaged them, and shipped them. And so I did work there my junior and senior year of high school in the summer. And then I came home in college and worked there. I did. And at one point, I became what they called a sales and engineering rep where I learned the inner workings of the machines. I wasn't an engineer but I would teach seminars. And I traveled all over the country when they introduced electronics into the amusement. We went from electromechanical to purely electronics. I went out and gave eight-hour seminars all over the country to the mechanics in the field to teach them how to repair these things.

Michael Kranish: You just were totally surrounded by the whole gambling?

John O'Donnell: Yeah. It was --

Michael Kranish: Really [indiscernible].

John O'Donnell: Yeah. It really wasn't much of a question for me, quite frankly, that I was going to be part of this. I didn't know at the time that I would -- because Bally didn't have a casino so I didn't know that I would get exposed to casinos in a way that I kind of fell in love with them. I went out to Las Vegas to learn how the slot machine worked, learn how to repair slot machines. I knew all the intricacies and how the other machines worked. And then they sent me to Las Vegas to learn how the slot machines worked. And, of course, when I got there, I was fascinated with it. And then, I mean, the rest is kind of history there. I got a job literally at the Star Dust Casino.

Michael Kranish: In Vegas?

John O'Donnell: Yeah. And I was a slot floor man. I walked around the floor cleaning jams and paying jackpots and doing that. I was 21, 22. And that was kind of it. And when Bally decided to -- I learned everything I did. At nighttime, I was going to learn how to deal blackjack and craps and all the games. And I went to the school to be a slot mechanic. And

then I started working at the Star Dust and I just loved being on the casino floor.

And so when Bally opened or before they opened, when Bally decided to get in the casino business, they did Park Place in Atlantic City. And that was Bally's first venture into actually operating instead of just selling equipment.

Michael Kranish: What year was that?

John O'Donnell: And I went there as the assistant slot manager.

Michael Kranish: What year was that?

John O'Donnell: '78, '79.

Michael Kranish: That was the start of that.

John O'Donnell: Yeah. Yeah. Resorts had opened and then Caesar's opened and Bally was the third casino to open. So we did a fast track project. I was there about 13 months before the casino opened and I opened up as the assistant slot manager. And shortly after we opened, the slot manager left and I got promoted to slot manager.

And so this is where I say I don't know that I'm the smartest guy out there. But what I was, is I was a guy that was at the land of opportunity. And that's what Atlantic was in the early days because there was really no talent in the town because most of the old school Vegas guys that knew the business, they didn't want to move from Nevada to New Jersey.

And then half of them that did move found out they couldn't get licensed for whatever reason and they were shipped back to Nevada. And so you were constantly getting opportunity. And if you put your hand up, it was like --

Michael Kranish: You got that.

John O'Donnell: Yeah. My big break came because of Steve Wynn. Steve saw some of the things that I was doing at Park Place because we were pretty aggressive and we were being innovative and we were doing some things. And then he chased me pretty hard.

Michael Kranish: And you know him from Vegas?

John O'Donnell: I didn't know Steve at that point. But one of his attorneys that I did know called me and said, "You need to meet Steve Wynn. He's really interested in what you're doing. And would you be interested in talking to him?" And so, I did. I was very interested. I went and met Steve. And he offered me a job and I turned him down, actually. And then six months later, I went, God, I need to be around this guy. And I called him back and said, I might have blown it. But can we talk again? And he was like absolutely. He hired me on the phone on the spot. He said, "I want you." And so I started to work for him.

Michael Kranish: Which [indiscernible]?

John O'Donnell: The Gold Nugget in Atlantic City.

Michael Kranish: Gold Nugget in Atlantic City.

John O'Donnell: Right. Yeah. I wound up being in Atlantic City for 13 years. I mean, if people were to say to me where did you get your first real break, it was from Steve because he said to me -- first off, he recognized that the industry was really going to become a slot industry that the table game in terms of making money, table games was second class to what you can make with slot machines. He was the first one to really acknowledge it. And so he realized that it needed the same kind of talent that they traditionally put into the table game side. I was a hard worker, but if I owe anybody, I would say it's Steve Wynn.

Michael Kranish: I don't know if you're even allowed to but do you gamble? Were you allowed to gamble?

John O'Donnell: In those days, we were not allowed to gamble in Atlantic City. We would have meetings that I would have to go to in Las Vegas. Sometimes four, five, or six of us, we would walk across the street to the Horseshoe and craps at night. And Steve used to get a kick out of that. He thought that was a great thing. "My guys are out there" being like customers, right? And that was kind of a philosophy back then is that the reason the real gamblers wanted to come to the Golden Nugget is because we understood them. But I was never a gambler. Fun every now and then. But if I was to take all of

my years, I probably haven't actually gambled at a table more than two or three times in any given year. So no, it really wasn't the thing for me. So I was to ever do anything when I was in Las Vegas, for kicks, I would like to bet on some sports. But that was really it, so you know.

Michael Kranish: I was in Vegas on some story and put a quarter in a slot machine, doubled my money. And I said, "Yes. I can say that was my last." That was it.

John O'Donnell: That's that. Yeah, that's okay. That's all right. It's a pretty good experience. But it's a fascinating business. And I really was enamored with it. And quite frankly, I was enamored with Steve, how aggressive he was and how he wanted to innovate.

One thing wound up happening for me is that I had a -- I didn't really love Las Vegas. I had lived in Las Vegas a couple of times. And the first time, I was single and I felt kind of lonely there. I didn't make a lot of friends. People that I knew were really work related. And I don't want to say it, I felt the town was phony. But I just found it hard to live in the town.

And then the second time I lived there, before I went to Atlantic City, my wife at the time, we lived there. I felt it was kind of the same thing. The two of us just kind of did our thing. So I never loved the town. I was the senior vice-

president of marketing for Steve. I worked my way up to that position. So I had all the slot operation, all the slot marketing. And then I had marketing for everything, the whole property. I was doing development work for him on new products at a corporate level. So I was going back and forth to Vegas. And he sold the Gold Nugget in Atlantic City. And basically, that's how he financed the Mirage. And so when he sold that business, he called me that night and said, "You're coming to Vegas with me. I need you to know this." And I was like, wow. We had four senior VPs, so I kind of circled back with them and I was like, "Did you get a call from Steve?" And nobody had gotten a call. And so I'm not just patting myself in the back, but I was the only person that he asked to come.

And so I talked about it with my wife, and she didn't want to go back. She didn't want to move to Las Vegas. We had a daughter at that point. And Steve Hyde who I worked with at the Golden Nugget and Mark Etess who I worked with, they had left a year before to go to Trump. And they had throughout that year and kept saying, "You've got to come. You've got to come. You've got to come. We need you. We need you. We need you." And so the minute Steve Hyde heard about the Golden Nugget deal, he called me and said, "Come right now." He said, "Within six months I'll make you the president of the Trump Plaza. If you come over here as the senior VP of marketing, just what you have

there, everything you got, you will become the president of this property." And so I talked to my wife and I decided to do that.

And it was the toughest conversation I ever had with Steve Wynn. And I remember it like it was yesterday, I called him and I said, "Steve, I'm not going to go. And my wife wants to stay here and I'm going to honor that." And he was a little bit upset. But he begged me. I'll never forget the conversation because he said to me, "Jack, anybody but Trump. Don't work for Trump." He said, "Let me call Jack Davis at Resorts right now." He goes, "Go to work for them but don't go to work for Trump." And I was like, "I don't want to work for them." I was like, "Steve, I don't know him." I said, "I'm not going to work for them." And so, again, the rest is history. I went to work --

Michael Kranish: Why did he say, "Anybody but Trump"

John O'Donnell: He just didn't -- it's just like he didn't want me there.

Michael Kranish: Is he a competitor or is it, I don't like Trump. Trump will be bad for you.

John O'Donnell: He just said that to me.

Michael Kranish: Because they had a sort of back and forth relationship.

John O'Donnell: Yeah. Well, back then it was pretty rocky. There was no love lost between them.

Michael Kranish: Are you still in touch with Steve Wynn?

John O'Donnell: I've stayed in touch with Steve for a long time. But I have not been in touch with him for several years now.

Michael Kranish: A colleague of mine --

John O'Donnell: He's hard to get to.

Michael Kranish: Yeah, we did because I just emailed him last night just to double check. I did try to reach but I think that [indiscernible]. For this whole project, they did interact quite a bit. [Indiscernible] Trump, I don't know.

John O'Donnell: I had a great relationship with Steve. Even after I left Atlantic City, we kept a relationship. I called him for advice on the Mississippi project. The first time I was going to, quote, be an owner, I mean, the first guy I called was Steve. When I called him, I was like, hey, I've got this opportunity. And there were some things I wanted to talk to him about and he was -- I flew out to Vegas to see him. I sat and talked to him and we talked about it. And we stayed in touch.

I was particularly close to kind of like his senior host. So every time I would go to Las Vegas, Charlie Meyerson was his name. Kind of a legendary guy. Charlie and I would get together and have dinner. And then we'd ultimately go sit. I'd say hi to Steve. And I had a great relationship with him. And then, of course, time goes by. When you're not busy, he's busy.

It just drifts. And I will tell you that I had a very similar experience. There was something in the past year that I wanted to talk to him about something that I thought he would want to know, quite frankly, and I couldn't get to him. And I found out that interesting. And then an associate of his told me, he said, "Don't let your feeling be hurt because he don't talk to anybody anymore. He doesn't do that. He's in his own world."

Michael Kranish: I know. *Boston Globe*, the constant stories about his [indiscernible] outside of Boston.

John O'Donnell: Listen, from my era, so of speak, if there was a man, he's the guy. Before him, it might have been the Benny Binions of the world that did the Horseshoe. Steve changed the face of gambling really like nobody else has.

Michael Kranish: Okay. So this takes us up to the Trump period. Let's just take a break for one second.

Michael Kranish: This is part two, for the purposes of this. So, part two with John O'Donnell. And this is Michael Kranish during this interview here in lovely Tucson, Arizona. Okay. Let's see if I can get this to work. One thing I want to ask you about before I forget is Steve Hyde. You had that wonderful line in the book where you talk about that he may be the closest friend that Trump ever had. Losing that person, if you tie this, seem really important in trying to understand

Trump and why, you know, that person, you mentioned that as a casino executive, that you are not allowed to gamble, right? So, he would not be allowed to gamble but also it's against the Mormon religion - the Mormon Church, not the religion, but the church and so forth. So, how did he become a casino executive if he was a Mormon and a practicing Mormon?

John O'Donnell: Well, it's actually, you know, it's quite interesting. There are a tremendous amount of Mormons of I think -- I don't want to say historically or traditionally or whatever. They've lived in Nevada and it's the proximity to Utah, I'm guessing, but there's always been a very strong Mormon population in Las Vegas and that was the economy in Las Vegas, it was gambling. And so, consequently, you find a lot of Mormons that were working in the industry. I think Steve, in that group so to speak, probably was the highest ranking individual. But, yeah, I mean, he was an accountant by background, okay? And so, he got into the business just because of the business and he was a good businessman. I think his career developed just like anybody else.

You know, we started with Caesars, I believe, if I remember right and he worked his way up in that organization. And then, they moved him to Atlantic City and he became a bit of a star at Caesars in Atlantic City when it opened. And then, Wynn wooed him, so to speak, to come over to his property. And then Trump

did the same thing. Steve had a reputation as a solid, thoughtful operator and clearly had a reputation as a guy that people wanted to work for. I mean, he was a people person as any individual you ever want to meet. I mean, he was just a fine man. Steve was really an incredible human being.

Michael Kranish: And you said he had seven children. Is that right?

John O'Donnell: I think it was seven, yeah.

Michael Kranish: Yeah. Did you ever talk about whether there is any contradiction between being a Mormon, a practicing Mormon? He was practicing, right?

John O'Donnell: Oh, yeah. He was a -- I forget what his title or something. But he was a senior person, so to speak, in his church. I mean, he was a very highly regarded man.

Michael Kranish: Was there a church in whether it was Northfield or --?

John O'Donnell: Yeah, yeah.

Michael Kranish: It was in Northfield? There was a Mormon church?

John O'Donnell: Uh-huh. Yeah.

Michael Kranish: So, he was a leader there?

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: And so, I guess there are a lot of -
- maybe that's why Mormons are hired in the business, if I
assume this correct, that they want someone who's not going to
be tempted by gambling itself. There is [indiscernible] from
the business aspect?

John O'Donnell: Well, I don't know. I mean, back in
those days -- I mean the industry changed so much. Steve was
your highly educated MBA kind of guy back then and happened to
be a Mormon as well. There weren't as many people like Steve,
generally, in the business where accountants, so to speak, were
rising to the top. Back then, it was still mostly old school
gamers that were rising to the top.

But Atlantic City changed that in this industry. You know,
it became more sophisticated, more corporate. It was more where
Las Vegas and Nevada it was the good old boys, Jews who you knew
[sounds like], so to speak. Once Atlantic City came into play,
companies were financing themselves through more traditional
banking institutions. Wall Street became involved in the
industry once gambling moved to the East Coast. So, I think the
level of sophistication went up dramatically as a result of
Atlantic City, the people who were running it.

And, you know, the Wall Street people wanted guys like
Steve Hyde versus somebody that had just come up to the table
games and became the president of a place. Kind of before

Atlantic City, if a casino manager is fired, okay, 20 people left. A new guy came in and brought 20 new people because he brought his, quote, team, right? It doesn't happen anymore. It's a more sophisticated approach. The parts move like a normal business now.

Steve was one of these guys that was -- Wall Street was looking for people like Steve. All of sudden, the industry was different. And he was a great presentation, he was smart, people loved him, he understood the business. So, yeah.

Michael Kranish: Yeah, he's really interesting. Why do you think he was such a close friend? Because Trump just relied on him so much that he -- or is he something else?

[Cross-talking]

Was there any -- let me ask you this way. Trump doesn't drink, smoke, gamble himself, and so forth. Was there any connection over the fact that they're in the business but they don't have these various things that all people in the business might as part of the background?

John O'Donnell: Well, I don't really -- I mean, I think Steve's reputation, I think, as an operator was really key. I think that they developed a friendship because Donald could absolutely trust Steve. Steve was not the kind of guy that was always looking for the next thing. If Steve was -- I mean, Steve wasn't looking to, quote, retire after Trump. He

wasn't looking for his next job. And let's face it, Steve did everything that Donald asked him to do. I mean, he took a business that had some management issues when it was the partnership between Trump and Harrah's. Steve was able to seamlessly kind of get rid of Harrah's and make this Trump's business, right? He was able to bring in tremendous talent. When he brought Mark Etess into this organization, I mean, it changed from a marketing standpoint almost instantly because Mark was young, he was aggressive, he knew -- he was as personable as anybody you want to meet with the customers. And so, he knew the whole customer base from the Golden Nugget.

Steve was able to bring good talent in. He brought in a great casino manager. He just brought in good hotel people. He brought in topnotch people. They wanted to work for him.

Michael Kranish: And at some point, he -- they lose patience with Trump or feel -- you mentioned in the book, two weeks before the crash that he was talking about maybe moving back West or moving --

John O'Donnell: Yeah. Well, he had clearly become frustrated with Trump's irrational behavior, his outburst, his lack of ability to listen to logic. Steve could take criticism if criticism was warranted. I mean, he was that kind of person, you could talk to him. But Steve was not the kind of person that could be abused and it wouldn't affect him because he was

such a gentle guy. Donald clearly had become abusive in the way he would talk to Steve. But really just because that's the way Donald was. If he walked into a construction thing and he didn't like something it's the punch in the hole in the ceiling kind of thing. That was really the opposite of Steve. Steve was such a kind and gentle guy. Even when Steve got upset, it was hard to tell he was upset. And so, now you take this opposite, this guy that quite frankly is acting like a maniac. And he's got the women issues going on and everything that's going on between Ivana and Marla. I mean, Steve lost respect for sure.

I think Steve became -- to look forward to achieving the final piece of this for Donald. Getting the Taj Mahal opened, getting it opened successfully, having good management in all these places, okay, and then saying I kind of did what I told you I was going to do and then move on. And I think that's where Steve's heart and his head were.

Michael Kranish: So, you think he would have probably left shortly after the Taj opening?

John O'Donnell: You know, he never said that to me but yes, I believe that that's exactly what he was going to do. He was going to get Donald through that piece because he was very committed that way. He wasn't going to quit just because

Donald was a maniac. I mean, quite frankly, like, I quit because Donald was a maniac. Steve was a different kind of guy.

Michael Kranish: When you say Donald was a maniac, people hear about this and you have this unusual firsthand experience. What comes to your mind? What do you think of that? You wrote the book and so forth. But what immediately comes to your mind when you say that?

John O'Donnell: Well, I mean, I think, you know, his explosive behavior. And when I say maniac, it's not just a screaming maniac, it's kind of a -- it's a person that doesn't listen to fact. Truth, fact, it made no difference. He sees the world back then through his eyes and his eyes only. If you had a stack of reasons why his vision was wrong, you couldn't change it.

I mean, I think I talked about the budget process as an example. It was a painstaking process in terms of assessing the marketplace, making assumptions about what was going to happen, the reality of market share, how it was divided between the 10 or 11 casinos that existed at that point. You would say to yourself, here's what I think we can do. There were realistic expectations of how the market might change in a 12-month period, okay? That's how budgets and things are put together, operating plans are put together. All that logic would mean nothing. It would be like, no, I want the number to be X.

Michael Kranish: I've read that anecdote where he's basically -- is that even legal to -- you know. If you've got people who are being told - you've done your due diligence and I want the number to be this, we're just going to say it's this. And you've got bondholders who are being told we can meet these numbers but they're basically made up, it sounds like.

John O'Donnell: Well, I mean, that was the demand that was put on back then, it was just to develop a plan around what he wanted as the end result and realistic or not. I can't answer the question about legality. I don't believe that anybody would have invested in the company if they really knew that this was how the business was run [sounds like].

He's lucky in the sense that there really were smart people running his businesses in Atlantic City and there were people that like myself, quite frankly, that were very aggressive. I took a great deal of pride in being the best in that town and running a business that generated the most revenue of any casino in that town. I took a great deal of pride that we developed international programs where we knew flat out we were taking business from Caesars, a piece of their business that they had dominated for years, and years, and years. And so, we were aggressive and it's what he liked. I mean, he liked that.

Atlantic City was a very competitive landscape more so than any place I've ever been in my life. I mean, you have to

understand that Atlantic City, the controllers of these casinos would meet on the boardwalk every Monday morning and we would trade numbers and so, we had a weekly report card. There's no business in the world that that happens.

Michael Kranish: Are you saying that was required or is it something that they did because you were there?

John O'Donnell: What would happen in Atlantic City was really the first marketplace where the regulators required and publicly disclosed monthly numbers. That never happened in Nevada. You really didn't know what was going on at the other casinos. You thought you were doing good, but you didn't really know how well you're doing compared to everybody else.

In Atlantic City, the numbers were coming out on a monthly basis anyhow. So, we all kind of got together and just said, well, what the hell. Why don't we just trade? You know, let's really start to analyze data. It was if we can analyze data on a weekly basis it's better than analyzing on a monthly basis. It's broken down just a little bit more. And so, we just thought it was a smart thing to do and everybody agreed. Nobody had a problem with it. And so, well, what it did turn into is you got a weekly report card. And so, when you're working for a guy like Donald Trump, he was pretty anxious every Monday to see where he stood. And then you answer the questions, why you were

number two this week versus number one the week before. So, yeah.

Michael Kranish: Okay. The first question -- I'm getting out of sequence here. I think I'm going to come back to this rather than ask a lot of questions out of sequence. So, I think what I want to do is call up -- I knew what I've written and go through what I have references to, to make sure that I'm saying things correctly.

Harrah's agreed to invest \$50 million in line of construction financing for the casino hotel. They had this deal together and so forth. In the book, you say Trump paid \$50 million, \$20 million of which went for management fee to Trump himself - I don't have the page in sight [sounds like], I'm sorry - and financed a \$107 million construction loan. Holiday claimed they went millions over budget and so forth and so on. I guess my question here is \$20 million for a management fee, is that's just like -- is he actually doing something for that or is that just basically a way to give extra profit to someone?

John O'Donnell: Well, I mean, I wasn't involved in any of that, that's quite clear. I think that's a great question. I think it was just for his name.

Michael Kranish: Is that before -- so, that's not firsthand information? Okay. I'll skip that. Because so much

of the stuff you have is firsthand information so I think the best thing is to keep it at things that you have firsthand information for. That's perfectly fine. Let's see.

There's a wonderful quote when he's buying the Hilton property where Hilton couldn't get -- incredibly, they've already done all this work, paid all this money to build a facility and then, Hilton was denied a license. So, is there anything suspicious about that? I mean, the idea that how you -- with a name such as Hilton so respected, and at the last minute, they're saying you don't get a license after you spent these millions of dollars.

John O'Donnell: I don't really think there was anything suspicious about it. It really was more suspicious -- what the most suspicious thing about Atlantic City to me was how the first casino actually got licensed. People worked to really do the research and they looked at the foundation of Resorts International and the business that they had in the Bahamas and all the moving parts. They got licensed and there was criticism. I think if you were to go back and look at the news clippings, there were criticism as to how this cast of characters that really had no experience in gaming suddenly became the first group --

Michael Kranish: I see. That was before Trump?

John O'Donnell: Right. But I think the pieces, here's how they fit, is that there was a lot of pressure on the Casino Control Commission from the governor to say, hey, we're tough. We're tough on the casino industry. And so, the next group to open was Caesars, okay. Their top management got thrown out. Bally was next, and my dad got thrown out. Along comes Hilton, Hilton gets thrown out. They're just making -- you know, they were like, if you have any connection, any way, you were gone.

And so, I don't think that there was anything -- I don't know that Trump was rooting for Hilton. I think like everybody else, everybody thought that ultimately, the commission's finally going to stop this and a guy like Hilton's going to get licensed, right? And so, no, I don't think that there was anything suspicious, that Trump was working -- you know, he's working behind the scenes. I really don't.

Michael Kranish: Okay. Because he then steps in and he gets this property. Now, you have this quote in the book, I don't remember if this is something that he said elsewhere or that you heard. The book's not footnoted so I have no way of knowing. So, I wanted to ask you this wonderful quote where he buys the property without ever having to set foot inside the property. He's quoted in the book saying, "If I told my father,

he would have said I lost my mind." Is that something that he had said elsewhere and James Rutherford found or that you --?

John O'Donnell: Yeah. Jimmy found that in a newspaper.*[Note , it is actually from Art of the Deal, p. 239.]*

Michael Kranish: In a newspaper story?

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: Okay. That wasn't something that you heard yourself. What was your experience with Fred Trump? Did you ever -- did you see him? Did you know anything about the relationship there?

John O'Donnell: I knew him to say hello. He was not in Atlantic City often but it was no more than, hello. How are you doing? You know, that kind of thing.

Michael Kranish: Did you have any sense there from talking to Donald Trump about his feelings of -- there is this sense where Fred Trump is very successful. He's constantly loaning Donald money. I don't want to say bailing him out but I mean, but I mean, fabulously, he was successful at first because he got money from his father, loans from his father. There was the million dollar loan when he was younger. During this period, he borrowed \$7.5 million from the estate. And then later on Fred came in and bought \$3 million plus of coins -

John O'Donnell: Chips.

Michael Kranish: -- which he got fined for. So, there's a number of periods there where his father is coming in and, you know, use your term that you like. Did you have any sense of all that he felt like he was inadequate compared to his father or that he was constantly trying to say, I can do this on my own, but needed his father's help or anything like that?

John O'Donnell: No. I think he was a guy that knew that his father would support him if he could. But, you know, he was exceptionally brash back then. He didn't talk about his father a lot. It was never like this was a family business, you know? There was never that sense at all, that the whole family was involved. So, I think that his father was a resource. He was a father that supported him when he needed help.

But the first time that there was ever a sense of family for me, that the family was really more involved or could be an important piece of it was when Robert started showing up. And I think that goes to the heart of the Steve Hyde thing, is that after Steve was gone, I think Donald hoped that he could rely on his family to become more involved in the business to create that safety, someone he could really trust like he had with Steve. So, I believe that that was the only reason that the family kind of came into the business of gambling.

Michael Kranish: Oh, I see. That's really -- because in here, I do write about Robert quite a bit. There's two

scenes. One in particular where Marvin Roffman, the analyst, had that quote which was in March 20 of 1990. So, well after Hyde and the others died in that crash. Roffman doesn't know the story's been published that day in *The Wall Street Journal*. He just comes on a pre-planned visit to see, I think it was the Taj, I guess, how it was going. As Roffman tells the story, Robert tells Roffman, get the fuck off the property, quote-unquote. And Roffman leaves and then, later that day, Donald Trump sends over a fax demanding an apology and so forth and so on. And that's March 20th. That's just couple of weeks before the opening of the Taj. And then, you have that scene that you described where Robert -- so, he quits, if I understand this, it was like the day of the opening or -- I want to go over the chronology with you because I wanted to make sure that I'm exactly right day by day.

John O'Donnell: Well, I really have to take a look. It was after the place opened that Robert walked out. I mean, there was this disastrous opening which is pretty well chronicled. It was kind of one day turned into the next whether -- because what had happened in this property, is that --

Michael Kranish: I got to have myself, I'm sorry. So, let me come to that. I want to go through that almost line by line to make sure that I got the timing right. So, let me -- before I get to that point, I jumped ahead a little bit. Ivana,

you had this quote in here where Donald describes her as a natural manager and yet, she's constantly creating this scenario where she's doing what's best for the Castle, what she believes what's best for the Castle even if it might hurt the Plaza.

And then, eventually, she is sent to the Plaza Hotel in New York City but there's that period that must have been a lot. So, you're talking about bringing the family in, that's before the crash. So, he brings Ivana in. Part of it is this trust issue. I mean, he trusts people to some degree but then he brings in his wife who has no experience whatsoever in running a casino. And then, he brings in his brother. So, is that just to help out people in the family or is it just -- he just, to a certain extent, doesn't trust others?

John O'Donnell: Well, no. I mean, listen. I believe that there was a great deal of pressure from Ivana to be, you know, that she didn't want to be in Donald's shadow, so to speak. If there was anybody in that family from my perspective, she wanted to be as smart as he was. She wanted to make a name for herself as a business woman. I think she put a lot of pressure on him to be in Atlantic City. I mean, it was high profile. And so, I don't know that it was because he, quote, trusted her so much, other than I just believe he got so much pressure from her that he let her have it.

I also think that -- I don't think he anticipated that there would be so much friction between Ivana and Steve Hyde. I mean, Ivana really resented that Steve was, quote, Donald's guy in Atlantic City. My guess is I don't think he appreciated how bad that relationship could be that she would be so difficult to work with. So, I don't know that it was trust. I mean, and some have speculated that it was just a get her out of his hair all the time. And she certainly listened from what I saw. I really didn't have a tremendous amount of contact with her. I mean, when she was there, she was a hardworking taskmaster. I don't know that she wanted it for -- if Leona Helmsley was her business icon that she wanted to be the next Leona. But she wanted to be known as a strong, tough, hard business woman.

Michael Kranish: What was the main run-in? I've heard about this but what was the main run-in with Hyde that comes to your mind?

John O'Donnell: Oh, I think it was just that Steve was the guy. I mean, he was Donald's. I mean, if Donald trusted somebody, it was him and I think that he certainly trusted Steve more than he did Ivana in terms of strategic direction.

Michael Kranish: And Steve's title, you know, like all the titles that change over the time and so forth, so at the

time that Ivana's at the Castle, what's Steve's position at the exact same time concurrently?

John O'Donnell: Well, I mean, we had positions where we were presidents and chief operating officers at the company. So that's what he had and they reported to in essence a CEO of -
-

Michael Kranish: So Ivana reported to Steve?

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: Theoretically.

John O'Donnell: Uh-huh.

Michael Kranish: But obviously, her husband was the overall [cross-talking] in the company? You may have another avenue going around it. [Cross-talking]

John O'Donnell: Steve was overseeing all of three properties.

Michael Kranish: But he had a person who was essentially --

John O'Donnell: But there was a very difficult manager at the Castle.

Michael Kranish: So he had a person who was running the Castle who had, you know --

John O'Donnell: Who had a different agenda.

Michael Kranish: Yeah. And might be hurting the Plaza by not being --

John O'Donnell: Well, listen. There was an opportunity here that Trump couldn't grasp. It's that you could own casinos in a marketplace and you didn't necessarily have to compete with each other, that they could co-exist. And of course now you see it all the time. I mean you look at Caesars up and down the strip in Las Vegas. You know, there are properties that Caesars owns right across the street from each other. And what they've strategically done though is they've allowed properties to create their own identity and their own niche in the market, so to speak, where they would say this is what you're going to do. And you're really not going to drift into this territory because this is kind of what Caesars Palace does. So you're not going to have a big international program. You're not going to do this, you're not going to do that, but this is what you're going to do, so that everybody gets their own appeal.

Trump couldn't see that. Trump couldn't see that the Plaza should be this gold standard. We were the ones that were taking the business from Caesars Palace. We were the ones that were doing the fights. We were the ones that were getting the high-end business from the Golden Nugget after it left. Everyone was coming to us.

And then the Castle had an opportunity to be this kind of mid-market, almost this Harrah's kind of place. It was perfect in that setting. It was. And no, Ivana wanted to be what the

Plaza was, instead of just saying, no, this is how it's going to be. Steve Hyde tried to get that to happen, but it was not going to happen. Donald didn't see that. He thought it was fun that we were all competing with each other, you know. It was just stupidity.

And now you're going to add the element of the Taj into this thing which was coming in but clearly, it was going to be going after exactly the same thing that the Plaza was doing. They built the arenas for it. They made the rooms nicer. It was three properties that from a strategic standpoint looked the same, that they were going after the same customer.

Michael Kranish: There's the problem you were talking about earlier about cannibalizing your own business?

John O'Donnell: Well, yeah. Yeah. He just didn't have the vision because his vision is Trump. That's really the problem for a guy like this. It has to fit Trump. If you take a small market like this where there's limited amount of casino space and you put three people in there that are all looking the same instead of differentiating, it's okay, you know, to go after different markets. But he just couldn't be convinced of that.

Michael Kranish: It seems to be fatal.

John O'Donnell: Yeah, it was fatal. I mean it's not like --

Michael Kranish: Okay. So I already asked you about the -- I'd highlighted this quote about truly trusted, that this was something. We talked about that. Let's see what else I have. Let's see. Oh, I used your wonderful anecdote about how the casinos [sounds like] have to buy 8000 copies of the book.

John O'Donnell: Those are the kind of things that you kind of forget about, but yeah, it happened.

Michael Kranish: And there's this quote, I don't remember if it was originally from you or from someplace else where Trump says, "I had to buy this \$350 million hotel just to get her out of here and look at how she's crying. That's why I'm sending her back to New York," talking about Ivana obviously. "That's why I'm sending her back to New York. I don't need someone crying, I need somebody strong in here to take care of this place." So you quote that in your book as well. But again, is that something that you heard?

John O'Donnell: Uh-huh.

Michael Kranish: I think it might have also been in a story somewhere, I don't remember. Maybe somebody in a story, but in the book. I quoted it from the book. But that's extraordinarily striking. And again, so when he does that, "Remind me who's taking her place," then she leaves to go run the Plaza Hotel in New York which also didn't work out, obviously.

John O'Donnell: Then Steve brought somebody in.

Michael Kranish: Someone else came in?

John O'Donnell: Yes. Steve Hyde. I mean, Donald turned to Steve after that.

Michael Kranish: Right. Okay. Hang on. Here's where I want to go almost line by line to make sure I got the chronology correct. Just one second. Oops, that's not it. Okay, all right.

Now, you were in Hawaii, when this was taking place as far as the helicopter. There was, as you described it, this was a press conference. At first Trump didn't want to do it, it's a waste of time. Hyde felt he had to convince Trump to do it because this was the first Trump sports entertainment-sponsored event and that it needed that kind of publicity. So Trump then said, "Okay, fine."

I couldn't find -- I do see stories from that day where there was some talk about it. I just couldn't find a story that happened to mention Trump talking about it for whatever reason.

John O'Donnell: About the fight?

Michael Kranish: Yeah. You weren't there obviously, but do you happen to know where that press conference was? Was it at Trump Tower or someplace else?

John O'Donnell: I don't know. I'm trying to think right now where that would have been. We did some at the Plaza.

Michael Kranish: Yeah, the Plaza Hotel.

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: Somebody opening there. They did meet at the Trump. You know, there was this delay and they met at the Trump Tower office apparently.

John O'Donnell: Yeah, I mean I'm going to bet it was at the Plaza.

Michael Kranish: At the Plaza, it makes sense.

John O'Donnell: Quite frankly, I'm forgetting that detail. It was a long time ago but if it was one thing, it was the Plaza.

Michael Kranish: That's helpful.

John O'Donnell: We did stuff there.

Michael Kranish: Right, right. I didn't mention it to you, but with my co-author here, we did interview Trump a week or so down at Trump Tower.

John O'Donnell: Oh, okay. Great.

Michael Kranish: We're going to talk to him again, hopefully more than once. He knows what we're doing. We explained it to him like I explained it to you, stories in the newspaper, stories that turned into a book and so forth. He did agree. We'll see if he continues to say -- will continue talking to us. So one thing --

John O'Donnell: Right, right.

Michael Kranish: There are many more questions to ask. So assuming that I can go back and do another interview with Trump, I will ask him about some of these things, very specifically the idea that meeting with you twice, which doesn't make any sense obviously. You mentioned that you actually would have had hundreds of interactions with him. I want to ask him how could you say only twice.

John O'Donnell: ... I don't think I'm any kind of a hero. I don't think anything that I'm going to say is really going to change too many people, but I think maybe a combination of hearing that from so many people which I think he's going to get in the next six months, that this person hasn't changed from the day I wrote this to today; that he will say anything to accomplish whatever the next objective is for him. In this case it's to become the president of the United States.

You know, that's so scary. You'll say anything to obtain a piece of land in Scotland to build a golf course...

Michael Kranish: Why is it scary to you?

John O'Donnell: I mean it's scary to me that if you believe that the most powerful position in the world is the president of the United States and it's been said that it is by many for a long time.

Michael Kranish: Sure.

John O'Donnell: And I think that it's true, it's difficult for me to comprehend that somebody with his intellect, megalomania, whatever you want to say that that would be that person, in charge of this country. I mean it's just frightening to me because I believe in my heart that he would say anything, true or not, to accomplish whatever the goal is for the day. I don't think he has the mental capacity to sort through the issues that are going to be brought to him as the president whether it's on the economy, or whether it's on foreign relations.

I don't think he has the mental capacity to take the data in that I think the president has to take from a wide range of people with real knowledge and that he will take it in comprehensively and make decisions. I just don't believe it.

Michael Kranish: Someone hearing that the first time they might say, okay, what's your political background, who do you support, and all that kind of stuff to get that question answered. What's the answer to that?

John O'Donnell: Well, I am a Democrat, okay? But I do consider myself fairly independent in the sense that now I have to be a Democrat in today's world because the Republican platform is so offensive to me in the way that it's developed let's say over the last 15 to 20 years. There was a day in my life that I was interested in the Ross Perots of the world. And

there was a day that I loved Gerry Ford, okay? I thought he was really a good man. I thought he was good for the country. I was devastated that Jimmy Carter was elected, okay? But quite frankly, you know, with what's going in the world it's mostly the social issues for me. I mean it is. [Cross-talking]

Michael Kranish: I'm not questioning what you're saying whatsoever. This is just a question to ask. When there was an Arizona primary did you vote?

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: Did you vote for Hillary Clinton?

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: Right, then of course Trump would say, a-ha.

John O'Donnell: Well, of course. I believe it's not one of those. If you -- the Hillary campaign, there are pieces I've heard that were difficult for me. I wanted Barack Obama to win the nomination eight years ago over her. I mean, there's a sense of entitlement that she carries that I find very, very difficult to even look at sometimes.

So it isn't that I love her, you know. And if you were to tell me that Joe Biden was running against her, I would be saying, I want Joe Biden, quite frankly. I can't say that about Bernie Sanders; I can say that about Joe Biden. I think, unfortunately again the country's going to be put in a position

where it's going to be, what's the lesser of two evils? I certainly think she's the lesser of two evils when it comes to Donald Trump.

Michael Kranish: So you're -- because you're unique. You had this first-hand experience. You didn't have to sign a non-disclosure agreement.

John O'Donnell: No. It all came after me. It came because of me.

Michael Kranish: Probably it came because of you.

John O'Donnell: No, it didn't, it was because of me. Very shortly after I left and he found out about this book, there was a mandate that went out in his organization that I was told that every employee had to sign a non-disclosure.

Michael Kranish: Yeah?

John O'Donnell: And I was told, down to the lowest level.

Michael Kranish: Okay. Let me go back to -- just double-checking some of these things here. So it is the Plaza Hotel where that press conference occurred. You know, there's been a lot of different quotes about whether Trump thought about going on a helicopter ride and so forth. What do you --

John O'Donnell: I think it was all bullshit. Excuse my language. I don't think he had any intention of getting on that helicopter that day.

Michael Kranish: No?

John O'Donnell: He might have casually said, "Maybe I'll come down to Atlantic City later." But it would have been completely out of character for him just to say, "Oh, I'll just jump on that chartered helicopter with you guys." He had his own. He's got his own equipment that he travelled in. And if he was going to say that I was going to come, he'd say, "Cancel that, let's just take mine."

Michael Kranish: So he had a company helicopter, the Sikorsky that they flew up on. Was that a Trump company helicopter or was that a service that was often used by Trump?

John O'Donnell: Well, are you talking about the one that crashed?

Michael Kranish: No, the one that they went up on from -- they took a Sikorsky.

John O'Donnell: It was a charter.

Michael Kranish: It was a charter as well? So they took a charter out and they couldn't get that charter back, they missed it. They've got a meeting at Trump Tower, if I got the chronology correct. And they had to go to some charter service they'd never used before, and used a chopper they'd never used before, right?

John O'Donnell: We booked those, by the way, through the marketing -- we had a marketing department that did all of our bookings at Trump Plaza. So we had marketing reps that, when we

were running customers down. John Cuban [phonetic] calls in coming down [cross-talking].

Michael Kranish: How long a flight was it together from?

John O'Donnell: It was quick, it was about 45 minutes.

Michael Kranish: Forty-five minutes?

John O'Donnell: Yeah, if I remember right. It was a long time ago.

Michael Kranish: You landed where in New York?

John O'Donnell: One of the piers right down there, you know, I forget that, I mean, right in Manhattan.

Michael Kranish: Because I read that Trump lands at the roof of the Castle in Atlantic City.

John O'Donnell: Yeah, he did. Yeah.

Michael Kranish: Let me get to that.

John O'Donnell: But this one would have landed at Bader Field coming back with Steve and Mark at that point.

Michael Kranish: Would have come back to Bader Field? Is that an airport or --

John O'Donnell: It was an airport, yeah.

Michael Kranish: It was an airport in Atlantic City, all right. We haven't talked about Jonathan -- what was his last name?

John O'Donnell: Benanav.

Michael Kranish: Benanav. I looked up some background on him and I wondered if this is something that you would have heard before. If I have my information correct, I believe I do but I'm going to triple-check it. His grandmother died in a Nazi concentration camp. His father barely escaped. His father hid in the Romanian woods for six months before being liberated by Russian troops. The father-to-be escaped with 600 Jews on a boat to Turkey. On that boat, he met a woman who three days later, he married. This was Benanav's parents. Or is that a story that you remember him talking about?

John O'Donnell: No, I really don't.

Michael Kranish: Does that surprise you or is that in line --

John O'Donnell: No, I mean I kind of vaguely remember that there was a real background to the family but, no, I never had that conversation with Jon.

Michael Kranish: He's the executive vice-president of the Trump Plaza Casino Hotel and you wrote that he had recently bought his girlfriend an engagement ring but had not yet given it to her. So was this like just before the flight, did that happen or you remember talking to him?

John O'Donnell: Well, yeah. Jon would frequently get teased about when he was going to ask [a woman] to marry him. They were kind of long-term. He would frequently get teased by a

lot of us because we'd be together at things and when are you guys finally going to do it - you know, it was one of those things.

But, yes. I knew he was going to propose to her and yeah. Jon was, when I got to the property, Jon was the vice-president of hotel operations. I actually promoted Jon to the executive vice president position, and gave him, for the first time in his career, responsibility beyond just the hotel. I mean he's a Cornell guy. That was what he did predominantly. I mean he ran good hotels. I was the one that said you need to start doing more. You've got all this talent, you're an incredibly smart guy, you've got a great personality.

It was the philosophy of Steve Hyde it's that you were always grooming somebody. In the gaming industry because of the turnover, it made sense. So Jon was just kind of the guy that was there. Steve and Mark had brought him in, and I recognized just how smart he was, and said yeah. I don't have to look for anybody. This is the guy we should groom. Terrific, terrific guy.

In this business, the one I'm in now, one of the things that I do, every population, every four to five weeks I speak at a speaker meeting on Saturday nights to our population. When I talk about the traumas of my life, then one of the most significant traumas in my life that I've had and I've had to

work on it personally was I put that boy in the helicopter. You know, I asked him to go in my place.

Michael Kranish: Jonathan?

John O'Donnell: Jon, yeah. And I think you'll see, all these years later, all these years later, I'm not completely over it. He didn't have to go to that press conference. Steve and Mark could have handled it, but because of everything that was going on in the organization at the time, because of the competition that was brewing between the Plaza and the Castle and the Taj Mahal, okay, when I realized that I was not going to be at this press conference to like carry the Plaza torch, I went to Jon and said -- no, I went to Steve first. I said, Steve, I don't want Mark getting all the credit, as the Taj guy. I said I want a Plaza guy there. And he said, do what you want, if you wanted somebody to fill in for you, that's fine.

So I went to Jon and I said, "Jon, I need you to do me a favor. I need you to go and carry the torch. I want you to be at that dais. I want you to be on that panel. I want you to announce, you know, I want you to speak for the property at this press conference." And Jon was like over the moon. He was like, "Oh my God." He was so grateful and so that has happened, you know.

Michael Kranish: And you tell that story to your Saturday night groups?

John O'Donnell: I do. I do, because we all have something in our life. I have a lot of things but I'll tell you that I've been around a lot of death since I was young, okay? There was nothing that had a more profound impact on me as that day when those three guys died. I mean, I could have just told you I mean two years straight, there wasn't a day that I didn't think about those guys, and then it finally started to get better. I finally started to forget about it for a day, or two days or three days. It was something quite frankly I didn't think that I would ever experience that kind of grief again because I lost three people that I really cared for so suddenly.

And then unfortunately for me, I found out that there was an even worse kind of grief when my wife lost her daughter, a 16-year old daughter in a car accident 500 feet from our house. And then I really found out what grief was. So as my life has progressed I thought I knew. And yeah, that's part of my story. And I actually start my talk that I do, about an hour long talk that I do, I start with what's trauma for some people, what's trauma for others. I give an example of something that might be traumatic to other people but it's not to me. And then I say, this is the trauma in my life, and tell that story about the helicopter.

I mean, yeah, you would think that it's just something that happened and people move on. Quite frankly, to some extent, I

would almost bet you that the families have moved on in some regard more than I have. But it's still a pretty fresh day for me all these years later. If you want to talk about any day here and see me look to this book and go, "Oh, God, I forget what I said." I don't forget anything about that day.

Michael Kranish: And Etess. You talked about building this wonderful memorial to the three. I know the Etess Center is named after him. Did he ever build a monument like he said?

John O'Donnell: Etess, yeah.

Michael Kranish: Etess, sorry.

John O'Donnell: No, no, no. Now, the Plaza, they wound up giving a name and I think they put a plaque at the [indiscernible], the entrance to the hotel in Benanav's. That's what they wound up doing for him.

Michael Kranish: Yeah.

John O'Donnell: The Etess Arena at the Taj.

Michael Kranish: Yeah.

John O'Donnell: And quite frankly, I don't know what he wound up doing for Steve.

Michael Kranish: Okay. Okay, so I got the report, by the way, from the National Transportation Safety Board which you know, I guess, Rutherford did as well including, you know, what happened with the accident. And then I described, you know, the phone call. You made a couple of phone calls. So you were in

Hawaii. So that's just simply -- much of anything after that. You know, I footnote it to the book. So is there anything else that's not in the book about your recollection of those phone calls with Trump right after it happened?

John O'Donnell: No. They were just anxious to get me back.

Michael Kranish: Right, of course.

John O'Donnell: But they were very anxious to get me back. I forget in the book if I even mention that we -- I landed in Los Angeles.

Michael Kranish: You do.

John O'Donnell: I do, okay.

Michael Kranish: Then you had this dramatic scene in the conference room where he was still in shock, talked about how, you know, building a monument. And then he talked to you and says, you know, I need you here. We need to take responsibility for it. If I understand this correctly, there were the three funerals. And you described this dramatic scene where Ivana and Marla are there together at the service for -- what was that? What's his name again?

John O'Donnell: Benanav.

Michael Kranish: Benanav.

John O'Donnell: Right.

Michael Kranish: Sorry. Benanav. Do you know if his parents were both there?

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: They're both there?

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: The refugees. Okay, good. That's good to know. I'm just going to put this in right now.

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: And who both attended the service. Okay. That's an extraordinary thing that Ivana and Marla are there together. The separation has been announced at that point? This was after the Taj opening? I'm not sure. I'll check.

John O'Donnell: No. Oh, no. It was not.

Michael Kranish: No, it's not?

John O'Donnell: No.

Michael Kranish: Okay. Oh, right. This was on October. I think after. I think it was after that.

John O'Donnell: Right.

Michael Kranish: October was the crash and then Aspen was in December.

John O'Donnell: Right.

Michael Kranish: Right. Of course, that's right. Okay. Here's something I want to ask you about. From reading the book I got the sense -- oh, I certainly got it again here today that

you're an astute observer of human nature. And that you sort of you have to be to understand why someone is willing to - I said to you I've never come upon it in that sense - but why is it that people are willing to gamble so much of their money when they know that the odds were against them? Why is that? Is that something that's important for an executive to know at a casino to understand human nature, why they're willing to do that? What makes a gambler tick and how far you should push them and not too far and so forth?

John O'Donnell: The vast majority of people do it strictly for entertainment. You know, it's just fun. And so, I think that that's the objective. I think that there is a group that it kicks up a notch even though I think it's there for everybody. Of course, there is the excitement that you might win big, okay. And so, I think that that's a real appealing piece of the gambler.

At the higher end, okay, and even at the lower end - I mean, and this is the old Steven Wynn stuff - it's all about experience. It's how you're treated. If you go in and buy a \$150 sweater, you know, it's a transaction. You know, oh you bought a nice sweater. That's nice.

Michael Kranish: Yeah.

John O'Donnell: But if you go into a casino with the same \$150 and you're in this palatial space, and the bathrooms are as

beautiful as you've ever seen, and the restaurants are as nice, and the carpets as nice as you've seen, and you're in this whole place - it becomes an experience. And it becomes, no, this is where I want to be. You know, the people are really nice to you. They're coming up saying, you know, Michael, how are you doing today? It's good to see you back. They make you feel great for that \$150 at a casino. And so, that's a big, big part of it. It's how you feel because there's nothing tangible at the end of the day.

Michael Kranish: You probably lost the \$150.

John O'Donnell: Yeah. You know, you walk out of that store - even if they treated you like shit, you walked out of that store with a nice sweater, right?

Michael Kranish: Right.

John O'Donnell: You know, at the casino, you're not walking out with anything. And don't get me wrong. If that was the case every day, there wouldn't be any gamblers.

Michael Kranish: Yeah.

John O'Donnell: So people win one day, they lose the next day; they win one day, they lose the next day. But it all comes down [cross-talking].

Michael Kranish: Well, I mean at the end of your life, it's experiences so you could say it the other way around.

John O'Donnell: Yes.

Michael Kranish: You could say, we gave them the experience that you remember and you can't take the sweater with you, it's going to wear out [sounds like] experience, presumably it's good.

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: You know, you can see how that can be sold [sounds like]. Right?

John O'Donnell: You know, at the high end, it's about -- you know, for a lot of these guys back then it was about bragging rights. Of course, Trump sent his helicopter for me. And of course, he chartered it all for me. Of course, I could eat whatever I want. I could bring my girlfriend and you don't say anything about it. You know, it's like that.

Michael Kranish: Wow. Okay. It was striking that you get the storekeepers, the hourly workers. It wasn't just the high rollers and that was something that perhaps Trump didn't understand as well.

John O'Donnell: Well, he didn't really have -- I mean, that was one of the huge differences between Steve Wynn and Donald Trump. I mean, Steve Wynn really got that person getting off the bus with \$40 or \$50 in their pocket. It was really important to the business. Donald couldn't comprehend that.

Michael Kranish: Yeah.

John O'Donnell: You know, the people that were important to him was somebody that was losing a \$100,000. And so, I might have this huge group that's losing \$200,000 and they could have actually cost me less than this guy that's losing 100,000 but he cared about this guy.

Michael Kranish: Right.

John O'Donnell: Because that's who he relates to.

Michael Kranish: He didn't want to hang out with the masses that --

John O'Donnell: No.

Michael Kranish: No?

John O'Donnell: No. I mean, it was difficult back then even to get him to interact with the high-end people. He started to do it more, quite frankly even after I left, but it was difficult to get him to come to events and walk around and shake hands and say hello for the tiptop end.

Michael Kranish: Yeah.

John O'Donnell: It was impossible to get him to come to a slot event, so to speak, you know. And again, there's the difference. When Steven Wynn was in town, you know, he'd walk into a room full of slot players and it was like -- you know.

Michael Kranish: Was part of it the germophobe nature that he just didn't want to shake hands?

John O'Donnell: Well, I always thought that was a piece of it. You know, I really did because he genuinely didn't like doing that. And so, I think that was a piece of it. Yeah, I do.

Michael Kranish: But he's not shy a person? It's just you know, these people weren't his --

John O'Donnell: Yeah. I mean, it's kind of interesting. No, he's not a shy person but I don't think he was comfortable, you know, for whatever reason. Just that small talk over and over, the same thing, the same question. And it isn't like he would have anything profound to say on a one-on-one with just one person. Personally, I just don't think he ever really appreciated what the customer meant to the business.

Michael Kranish: Okay. Okay. Let's see. Yeah, I tell this anecdote that you were -- you know, for [indiscernible] that you tell, where he has the name on the buildings just like what you said. But he didn't want to interact with some of those customers who were attracted by the name. And that seemed like there is a strange dichotomy there. That it's all about Trump but that when it came down to the actual person, actually he wasn't as comfortable with that. He made the transaction based on his name and so forth. Okay.

And here's where we're going to do some of the detailed chronology that I want to make sure I understand because there's

a week of openings. And when you read newspaper stories or other articles or books and so forth, oftentimes like there's seems like there's five days of openings. And I get concerned that things were happening on day X and maybe day Y because it wasn't one opening day. But often, all the days were referred to as opening day in some cases, if you follow me.

John O'Donnell: Uh-huh.

Michael Kranish: So this may take a little looking at the chronology in the book.

John O'Donnell: Okay. This is Taj?

Michael Kranish: Taj.

John O'Donnell: Okay.

Michael Kranish: So March 20, I mentioned the anecdote -- March 20, 1990. This is two weeks before the Taj. I mentioned the anecdote with Marvin Roffman. So that's something I have separately. That story said the Taj would be \$1.3 million or more every day to pay the bills and the loans more than any casino had ever taken in. And he said accurately as it turns out that it's going to blow through the record books in April, June and July. But later on, it's not going to do very well. That's exactly what happened, right?

John O'Donnell: Uh-huh.

Michael Kranish: And then I told you about the anecdote where Robert said Roffman visited that day and not realizing

that the story had been published and Robert Trump said to Roffman, "Get the fuck off the property. Goodbye." And that's the day that Trump wrote that letter as well, faxed over a letter to Roffman's company. So that's sort of a little bit of the context there. And then the next morning, Roffman recanted the letter of apology and so forth and actually won a settlement against his company for being fired. And also won a secret settlement with Donald Trump that we don't know what happened. But presumably, Trump made some kind of settlement with him that's been secret.

John O'Donnell: That's what they say.

Michael Kranish: All right. So there's a weeklong set of events. Here's where I want to make sure I get the chronology right and I'm not certain I do. It's why I want to go over this again. You have a point at which he say, Jack, he calls you up. Six thousand employees for the Taj - is that right? I read that somewhere. Does that sound right, 6,000?

John O'Donnell: It was about that. Yeah.

Michael Kranish: That's an amazing number of people.

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: So he employed a lot of people to his credit.

John O'Donnell: Right.

Michael Kranish: So he calls you on the phone call and says, "Jack, I'm at the Taj. I've got big fucking problems over here. I've been at meetings with state all morning. They're not going to let me open. I've got a bunch of fucking idiots down there. You have to come down and straighten this out." So he must have called you at home or at the Plaza.

John O'Donnell: I was at the Plaza.

Michael Kranish: You were at the Plaza.

John O'Donnell: Because they sent a security guard down to get me.

Michael Kranish: Yeah. So I'm going to say from the casino to the Taj. And Trump awaited you there, correct?

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: All right. You're trying to figure out the problems. Everybody was costing Trump thousands of dollars. Trump asked you what was going on. Let's go with the language. And then you explained that he needed to reconcile accounts to satisfy state regulators.

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: There was inconsistency between reports of money bet in the casino and accounting sheets, a red flag. The regulators were always on the watch for theft. That's non-casino executives.

John O'Donnell: No.

Michael Kranish: Is that correct or not?

John O'Donnell: Well, the problem that they were having -- do you just want me to tell you what the problem was?

Michael Kranish: Sure, absolutely.

John O'Donnell: Okay. What the state would do is they would do a test run. And so, there was a process of opening the casino and closing the casino. And what happened in the process of this first test or the second test day, whichever it was, is that they couldn't reconcile where all the money was at the end of the day. And the only way you can really do that is if you understand how much money you started with, okay?

And so, what became obvious or clear is that they didn't know how much money they started with. So they didn't have what they would call an impressment, the impressed amount of cash that was distributed throughout the casino. And it could be in 20 different places, which is start with \$4 million and then you keep the \$3 million here and \$50,000 goes here, \$50,000 goes here and \$50,000 goes here. And then you have backup coin or whatever you have. They had no idea.

So I get there and I'm like, what's going on? And they said, we can't reconcile, we can't close out the shift. We can't close out because we don't know where we started.

Michael Kranish: Yeah.

John O'Donnell: And so, I was like how could this be? And then I just very simplistically said -- this wasn't my area of expertise, by the way.

Michael Kranish: Right.

John O'Donnell: Okay. I said, well, then we have to count all the money. We need to stop everything. We need to count the money. Just count. I want to know everything that's here.

Michael Kranish: Yeah.

John O'Donnell: And so, I called this guy, Tony, who's now the president, by the way. I think I told you this, the president for Tropicana. He runs all the things for Icahn.

Michael Kranish: Let me make sure I write this down so I can make sure.

John O'Donnell: So I called Tony and he's my controller. And I said, you got to get down here because they don't know --

John O'Donnell: And so, I called Tony and I also called a couple of other people from the Plaza. I said you need to bring a team of people down here because everybody was running scared in the Taj. I said we need somebody to just help count the money. I have to tell you, the book describes it. I mean, it was a nightmare. Just finding out the locations where money might have been stored was just crazy.

Michael Kranish: I listened to what you said again when I listened to the tape, but basically it's finding out where all the money is, make sure it adds up correctly.

John O'Donnell: They didn't know how much they had when they started, so there was no way they could figure out how much they should have at the end of the shift.

Michael Kranish: Then you recount where he tells you to fire people, but when he talks to the press, he's all smiles saying the only problem is we couldn't count all the money we're making fast enough. Now then here, again, I want to make sure the chronology is correct. Trump told you that you are now in charge. Don't leave here. Jack, don't leave me. What I'm a little confused on is - and I'm sure I just didn't read this carefully enough to understand this chronology - but I thought at that point Trump headed back to New York, not to return until the conclusion of the opening ceremonies a few days later. But then rereading it, Jack, I wasn't sure if I had that correct. What's the chronology here? He tells you, you're in charge, don't leave me. Does he then go back to New York?

John O'Donnell: I do believe he heads back to New York, and then it's just shuttling back and forth. There was no --

Michael Kranish: Shuttling back, so back and forth. That's what I read. I thought he was there on the first day of

opening week and then on day 5 of the opening week, the actual opening day, quote, unquote.

John O'Donnell: Yeah, where they had the big grand ceremony.

Michael Kranish: But he might have come back even in between.

John O'Donnell: Oh yeah. He was back and forth a couple of times, if I remember right.

Michael Kranish: Now that would make more sense.

John O'Donnell: Just so you know, those are his words. They had a guy who was in charge of that property. I basically said to him on the side, I'm just here to help.

Michael Kranish: So he goes back to New York but we know he comes back again several times. After some agonizing hours the state agreed to let the customers in the casino --

John O'Donnell: Well, if I remember this correctly, this is so long ago, is they wound up saying, okay, we finally got things reconciled. Because this was normal by the way that the state would say you're going to do a test run. Instead of just opening up for 24 hours, they would say you can open up for eight hours; you're going to do a test. The eight hours would turn into like a full day because you'd open and then you'd close, and you'd have to reconcile and do all of these.

What happened, the problems were so widespread in this casino that even once we got the money counted, the state didn't have faith that they could manage it going forward. So what they did, they finally -- because now Trump is up against a grand opening because he had all of these test days scheduled before, right? And then the grand opening then it's open for good. And so we were very focused and just make sure this casino is open on this grand opening day. We don't want to have to cancel this. We wound up negotiating with the state to say, okay, we're going to let -- I hate to say this, it might even be in here.

But they only let us open a portion of the casino to make sure that it was going to be run properly. And as the days went on, and the state kept seeing -- because they've let us open for the grand opening but only a portion of the casino. And then a couple of days later, they let a little bit more open. And then finally the entire property was open where the state became convinced that they finally had all the internal systems running properly. But by that point, I think it's very clear in here, I had brought Tony in. Tony brought a team of people. He really took control of getting this figured out on the casino floor. Just this insanity of this place, I kind of bowed out and just said I did my job. I got the place opened. After that grand opening, I just went back to my job at the Plaza.

Tony, unfortunately, who was very key to my operation, he wound up spending weeks and weeks down at the Taj. It took that long for him. And then finally, I had to kind of put my foot down on that and say time to come home. They need to stand in their own two feet. I mean, it was a mess. It was a big mess.

Michael Kranish: You described it as a colossal failure, the opening of the Taj.

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: But the public didn't really know this.

John O'Donnell: They really didn't.

Michael Kranish: They didn't know this.

John O'Donnell: No, they really didn't.

Michael Kranish: There was incredible publicity, a spectacular setting. Michael Jackson comes in. Did he stay overnight in the Taj?

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: Because they talk about him viewing the \$10,000 a night suite but I don't know if he actually stayed there.

John O'Donnell: No, I don't believe so.

Michael Kranish: He didn't stay there?

John O'Donnell: No, but in the background there's this carnage going on from a management standpoint. When you think about it, when you think about that you've got presidents and

you've got brothers. Robert winds up being a casualty of this place.

Michael Kranish: If this was a movie you have, literally it sounds like he comes to the meetings. He screams and yells. Things are terrible, a disaster, and walks out, arm in arm with Michael Jackson, everything's wonderful.

John O'Donnell: Well, yeah. I mean, believe me, he never uttered a sentence that actually helped solve the problem.

Michael Kranish: Did he have to pay Jackson to come?

John O'Donnell: No, I don't believe so.

Michael Kranish: No?

John O'Donnell: I don't believe so.

Michael Kranish: If I had this correct, a couple of nights later, Trump called you at home. He asked you would these problems have occurred if Steve Hyde and Mark Etess had they not been killed in the crash. You said, no, you didn't even think this would happen. To your surprise, Trump disagreed. I think these are Hyde's people. Here you quote him as saying, "I think these are Hyde's people's responsible for the problem." At this point, the way I read the book that you felt he's just in a state of disbelief, the idea that he somehow indirectly blaming the victims of this crash is the result probably of just his state of mind that he sees this entire thing crashing down. Is that right?

John O'Donnell: Listen. I think that when you put your name on something the way he does, it's a direct reflection. And so I just think he looked at it that way. If things are going to go south in any way, he's not going to be standing there and taking responsibility for it, it had to be the fault of somebody else.

Michael Kranish: Was this the main point where he was somehow blaming Hyde and Etess?

John O'Donnell: It started here. I mean, it was obvious that he was looking for a scapegoat, maybe looking for reasons to get rid of certain people. The Taj winds up to some extent the opening becomes like a footnote to everything else that happens after that.

Michael Kranish: Did he later say something more directly where he blamed them? It's like I'm getting at.

John O'Donnell: Yes.

Michael Kranish: What did he say directly later?

John O'Donnell: When the prediction of Marvin Roffman and all of these begins to come true, that's when he starts blaming Steve for his financial problems. I actually found an article where --

Michael Kranish: I think I have it. It's after you leave the scene. I don't know that I've got that.

John O'Donnell: I actually found an article where they quote, they say, O'Donnell has broken his silence on Trump simply because he doesn't like the way Trump's blaming the victims of the --

Michael Kranish: Oh, good. Let's look at that after. Again, I have a note to myself. I wasn't sure of the timing here. The following day, so I'm not clear. I guess what I have to do is pin things to days so I can say April X, April Y.

John O'Donnell: Yeah, and it starts off pretty clear here is that April 3rd is the day that I got the call to come over there.

Michael Kranish: Let me put that in my notes here one second. So when he calls you and says, Jack, I'm at the Taj --

John O'Donnell: That's April 3rd.

Michael Kranish: -- in an April 3rd phone call. I'll just put it here, April 3 phone call. Okay, good. You went over, it's April 3. This is just super helpful. He heads back to New York and is that on April 3rd as well?

John O'Donnell: Yes.

Michael Kranish: On the night of April 3rd?

John O'Donnell: Uh-huh.

Michael Kranish: On the night of April 3, he's scrambling to fix the problems. I say a couple of nights later Trump called you at home. That's what we just talked about, where he

was blaming. Is that on April 5th or am I wrong in saying a couple of nights later?

John O'Donnell: No, it's not --

Michael Kranish: It's April 5th. Actually, I think April 5th since you just told me the 3rd. I think the 5th is the day that they actually have what I would consider the full opening day with the speeches where he talks about Hyde. That was April 5.

John O'Donnell: Right.

Michael Kranish: I'm guessing it was the following night. I only guess obviously.

John O'Donnell: Oh, yeah, because I talked about -- so this is still 3:00. Yeah, here, I do say on the 3rd. I do say specifically that he went back to the Castle and he's helicoptered to New York. He didn't return until the grand opening on Thursday. Actually there is --

Michael Kranish: Hold on. Let me put some thoughts.

John O'Donnell: You should just go with that. What I'm saying is that he didn't come back until the morning of the grand opening.

Michael Kranish: Which would have been April 5th?

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: So if he called you saying with this happening with Hyde there, that must have been the 4th.

John O'Donnell: I just want to see. I think --

Michael Kranish: Or am I conflating? This is one phone call where he said the same thing when he called you saying -- no, you do describe [sounds like] calling you at home. So it's separate when he called you at the --

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: Let me see what page are you on.

John O'Donnell: I'm on 284. Because I talk about Donald in the meantime had virtually barricaded himself in his office in New York. That's the same day. That's the 3rd still.

Michael Kranish: That's the 3rd. So I shouldn't say he came back that night. He came back during the day.

John O'Donnell: I stayed up all night. Donald called at 6:30.

Michael Kranish: Hold on one second. Okay, go ahead. I'm sorry.

John O'Donnell: No, I'm just trying to get to this date.

Michael Kranish: At 6:30 Donald calls him.

John O'Donnell: I'm trying to get to that date where you think that Donald called me at home because I think that was after --

Michael Kranish: Are you looking at where he's talking to you about Hyde?

John O'Donnell: Yeah. Oh, here we go. So here we are. No, it was right in the midst of it he asked that question.

Michael Kranish: I'm sorry, the midst of what, the midst of --?

John O'Donnell: "I don't know with Steve and Mark. Do you think the problems would have existed if Steve and Mark were here today?" "No, Donald, they don't." "The truth, Jack." Donald said, "That is the truth. I think that Steve and Mark would have been able to focus on the financial people." What happened historically and what happened when Trump Plaza opened. See there --

Michael Kranish: That's right exactly. So when was that phone call?

John O'Donnell: This was at 11:30 that night he called, how are we doing? This would have been --

Michael Kranish: Could it also have been late that night of the 3rd or am I my wrong saying at home, or is that --?

John O'Donnell: No, it is that night.

Michael Kranish: The night of the 3rd?

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: Okay, good. This is what I needed. Were you at home then or you're still at the Taj?

John O'Donnell: No, I was at the Taj.

Michael Kranish: You're still at the Taj. All right. This is exactly where I want to be clear on. It's no minor thing. I just want to make sure it's done right. Late that night, so you think by 11:00? Does it say that?

John O'Donnell: I think it was 11:30 that night. At 11:30 that night he called me.

Michael Kranish: Donald was still working through the problems at the Taj, right?

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: Good. That's what I wanted to find out. That's excellent. Now again here, that's the 3rd. I wasn't sure on the timing of this one. Trump flew his helicopter from New York to Atlantic City landing at the roof of the Trump Castle. Knowing now that he went back and forth, was that the 4th or the 5th?

John O'Donnell: No. I say, he wasn't back and forth. So he didn't come back until the morning of the 5th, 8:00 AM. He didn't come back until the day of the grand opening.

Michael Kranish: There was the tour with Michael Jackson so we know he was there then. That would have been April 5th.

John O'Donnell: I'm guessing, yeah.

Michael Kranish: So I want to say two days later on April 5th. Good. This is exactly what I want to make sure I have correct. They did the tour. They toured the \$10,000 a night

Alexander the Great suite. Isn't that same day, the 5th, the actual opening day or the last day of the opening ceremonies that there's this meeting with you, Donald, and Robert? Do I have that correct?

John O'Donnell: Uh-huh.

Michael Kranish: That's the 5th as well. That opening day, so he actually quits on the day the Taj opens?

John O'Donnell: "[Indiscernible] half the machines." That's right. So on Friday, the 6th, we were told that Donald wanted to see us - me, Robert, Harvey, Walt, Nick - in Walt's office.

Michael Kranish: That's the day after then.

John O'Donnell: That's the 6th, yes.

Michael Kranish: So it's not at the day, it's the day after. Hold on a second. This is exactly what I need. I just want to make sure. I want to say the following day, April 6th.

John O'Donnell: Yeah. Did I mention that he slept at the Castle that night?

Michael Kranish: Trump did?

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: So Robert Trump's office was in the Taj or was in the where?

John O'Donnell: Yeah, he was pretty much stationed at the Taj.

Michael Kranish: Donald who had stayed overnight at the Castle, now arrives at Robert's office. I didn't write it down here but in the book he's yelling at someone about we're going to lose a fortune to a different executive.

John O'Donnell: You read this?

Michael Kranish: I read this.

John O'Donnell: He was really his attorney at that point.

Michael Kranish: I wrote down his name. I emailed someone else a couple of days ago saying have we reached this person. I don't believe we have. I don't know if I know what he's doing today. One of my colleagues, Mike, do you know what he's doing?

John O'Donnell: No. He had gotten involved at one point with -- he had some REIT or something that I think they owned resorts at one point and then they lost it through bankruptcy. But I don't know what he's doing now.

Michael Kranish: That's April 6th, the day after this incredible opening and publicity. He's yelling at you because obviously internally they know things are not going well. He yells at Robert. Now it's described as Robert quitting and we know later on that he quit but did he definitely quit that day? Was he ordered to come back and say, oh well, now I'm back, or did he helicopter back to New York? Did he ever return?

John O'Donnell: Yeah, gone.

Michael Kranish: He was gone.

John O'Donnell: Yeah, gone.

Michael Kranish: What did Donald say about that? He was like, okay, fine, I trusted him and he screwed up.

John O'Donnell: Yeah, Donald was moving on.

Michael Kranish: I can't find a story that actually quotes him talking about -- hold on a second. Okay, one second, I'm getting ahead of myself. The meeting with Robert, I'm going to have a note to myself. I'm not sure of the timing of this meeting. The Robert meeting I'm going to move. Yeah, it's a problem because in the chronology what I'm writing it ends with the opening, but I'm going to have to finesse that. That's definitely the day after, April 6th. Is that the same meeting? I got to look back in the book but if you got it in front of you, he's got this wonderful comment about I want people or I'm going to kick some ass, I want pricks or I'm [indiscernible] some nasty pricks from this company. Was that the same meeting where Robert decided to leave or was that a different meeting?

John O'Donnell: I'm pretty sure it's the same meeting. Yeah, it was the same meeting.

Michael Kranish: That was on the 6th.

John O'Donnell: Yeah. Because then he came out of one meeting after Robert left, he went down into the casino floor. He demoted Walt from the president to the chief financial

officer. He pulled him in and he put Bucky in charge, Bucky Howard.

Michael Kranish: Hold on, one second. I'm sorry. What happened the following day?

John O'Donnell: Obviously, Robert leaves. Later on, on the casino floor, he tells Walt that he is being replaced by Bucky. And then the following Monday, they put out a press release announcing that Bucky had become the president. Walt was going to be the chief financial officer, and that he had put Ed Tracy in charge of all the casinos in Atlantic City.

Michael Kranish: I don't know if I'll find it but it will be great if there's a -- one second. At that point, I'm going to stop this.

Michael Kranish: Okay, so part three of the interview with John O'Donnell. This is Michael Kranish of the *Washington Post* doing the interview.

Okay, so you were saying that ISG, it was written here that you were one of the beards. Or this person was one of the beards when Marla was in town, you were about to tell me.

John O'Donnell: Well, I mean he had people that he used all the time as beards. But sometimes, unwittingly, even the president of the organization like myself would become a beard if Donald was in town and Marla was in town and they were going

into an event. You would walk in or sit next to Marla, and Donald would sit somewhere else. And so if anybody ever asked, it would she was with him or with me.

Michael Kranish: So what does the word "beard" mean?

John O'Donnell: A disguise.

Michael Kranish: A disguise?

John O'Donnell: It's a disguise.

Michael Kranish: He's not really wearing a beard?

John O'Donnell: No, no, no. I think it's just a slang for disguising, misleading.

Michael Kranish: Okay. I've got to pause this one second.

Michael Kranish: I was going to say, when you look over this letter, which you hadn't seen for quite a while, what goes through your mind when you read this? Emotion, what do you think?

John O'Donnell: Well, I mean, it brings back the reality of the situation, quite frankly, when older, wiser Jack O'Donnell may not have done this. But I mean, this is clearly - - I knew that I could be threatened. I knew that fighting him, so to speak, by writing a book was something that people had advised me not to do. And people, point blank, told me it could be career ending in such a small, tight industry.

Well, listen, there's no question that writing this book hurt me in terms of, quote, my name in the industry. Being a tight industry, I think that there were people that looked at me as someone who couldn't be trusted in the inner circle of a company because I wrote this book. And I do believe that that's happened at times. But what I was saying is one of the reasons I'm so grateful to Merv Griffin is that in the midst of all this, Merv Griffin got to know me and said, "You're exactly what I need in my company right now and I trust you." And he didn't make me sign a non-disclosure. He didn't make me do anything. He did his background on me as a person, the character that I am. And he hired me.

People have called me and asked me questions about Merv. It was like, "Oh, you talked about Donald. You talked about Merv." I have nothing bad to say about Merv Griffin. And not that I would just say the bad. If I could say something good about Trump, I would. But I would never discuss a confidential conversation that I had with Merv Griffin because that's really who I am.

But when I read this, I mean, it is kind of a wake up. You go, wow. You kind of stood up to this guy. And I've always felt that I, quote, got away with it because I told the truth. And even though they did try to intimidate me, he never sued me, okay? And he might now but it's a little bit late. But I think

he realized that there was nothing to sue me about. I mean the truth rules here. But it emphasizes that this was serious stuff. And quite frankly, it shows me that I wasn't intimidated by him. It speaks to -- I don't know that he didn't put somebody up to writing that to me.

John O'Donnell: Yeah, I mean Donald -- I mean, you inherit a lot when a guy like Steve Hyde dies suddenly. And one of the things, and I think I say it in the book, is that Steve was so great at is like he shielded us from Donald. Even though I saw Donald and had plenty of my own interactions with him and I had already formed -- I already knew what he was like, some of what I knew about him was anecdotal coming through Steve because I had such a close relationship with Steve. And he would say Donald did this, Donald did that. I'll go, wow. But some of it early on I didn't see myself until Steve was gone.

And then to actually be in a conversation with him where it wasn't somebody telling you that he said this. You're sitting there listening to him talk in stereotypes about black people being lazy and that it was a trait in his mind. And you just go, oh my God. I mean, even 20 years ago, we had evolved as a society where you were going I can't believe this man is talking this way. This is like suicide. We can't talk this way in today's world. I mean, we were living in a world, too, of affirmative action in Atlantic City. So it was big deal. And

yet he's out there espousing these views of basically saying that everything that we were working to as an industry really was a mistake in his mind because we had affirmative action guidelines in order to be licensed on an annual basis. You had to present your affirmative action reports, and it was based on the population.

And so they wanted to see if the minority population was 33 percent or whatever it was at the time, they wanted to see action that was taking the company to get up to that percentage of 33 percent of your workforce at every level - entry level, managers, supervisors, whatever it might be - at every level, they wanted you at this. And if you weren't there, you had to show a plan as to how you were getting there and what you were doing because it's easy to say. But if you haven't done the executive development, it's hard to just say, okay, we're going to make 33 percent or 50 percent of our executive team is going to be female if you haven't developed these executives.

So what you would do is you would develop an executive development plan. And when opportunities came, these were the first people that get jobs because they were ready for the jobs. And I actually thought it was a phenomenal program. And actually when Atlantic City discontinued the program, I actually wrote a guest column for the *Atlantic City Press* saying, "This is bad. This is bad for the industry. I think they should have

kept the affirmative action laws in place," because it really did change the face of how people thought about the gaming industry. I think we became like this is a good industry. This is a serious industry. They get society. It's not this old school Las Vegas stuff where it's just every white guy and who you know and who your father is. And so the industry as a whole made huge progress in Atlantic City. And something that I think anybody that has worked there should be proud of. Trump, obviously, wasn't. He didn't agree with that.

Michael Kranish: Okay.

John O'Donnell: I don't know what to do with all this stuff. This is all just kind of press clippings and stuff like that. I don't know that it's anything that's really -- it's just some of it's old.

Michael Kranish: I guess if you don't mind, I'll just take a quick look through. Maybe something will jump out of me.

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: I'll put this back on pause.

Michael Kranish: All right. Multitasking. There's a separate group of reporters who was just looking into his bankruptcies, which I will end up writing about and so forth. So they had some questions. You left but maybe you were aware of this was their thinking. I'll just read you the question.

It would be easier. "O'Donnell left a matter of weeks before Trump began to meet with his bankers in the mid to late May area to negotiate restructuring of loans. Those negotiations involved assets beyond his casinos. But the casinos affected Trump's overall financial condition. Was O'Donnell aware before he left the bankers' talks were looming?"

John O'Donnell: Yes.

Michael Kranish: You were. This is not the bond holders but the bankers over his personal --

John O'Donnell: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I mean, I was very aware. It's one of the laughable things about Trump's claim that he didn't have the two conversations with me during this period. I mean, I was the president of this operation that was generating \$70 million a year in cash, and he was very concerned about that cash. And he was taking cash out of that business. It was very clear to me that he was juggling his cash needs for the other business with cash from Trump Plaza. It was every month it was the same thing. "How much cash can we get? How much cash can we get? What do you need for the operation? What do you have to have? What do you absolutely have to have?" And so it was very clear that there were issues, that there were bank pressures.

And, of course, there was also the whole realization that when somebody like myself was responsible for -- and I said this

in another conversation with you, I think, is that when someone like myself is running a casino and you're asked to participate in strategic meanings relative to the airline to see how you can prop that business up, it's like you got some problems here, right?

Michael Kranish: And this was when the Trump Shuttle [indiscernible] synergy wasn't flying people to Atlantic City. Occasionally, the planes will be used on off hours. But really there was no synergy. It was not simply --

John O'Donnell: No. They wanted to try to create that. It just never happened.

Michael Kranish: Yeah. And they're offering some like coupons essentially.

John O'Donnell: Right, right.

Michael Kranish: Which didn't get redeemed. But what percentage of those coupons were redeemed?

John O'Donnell: I don't even know.

Michael Kranish: Okay. All right, good. The second part of the question is Trump has said or written that he initiated those talks with bankers, but bankers have told us that [indiscernible] it was the other way around. Any idea if that's the case?

John O'Donnell: I don't know.

Michael Kranish: No. That was after you left. All right.

John O'Donnell: ... I just think the smaller circle that he could have, I think he's more comfortable with it. I mean, I never viewed him socially [sounds like]...It was hard to come up with more than five people that he kind of surrounded himself with at least out looking from the outside. I mean, for the organization, with the kind of the size of the organization, and then you saw how many people were actually involved at the Trump Tower level, so to speak, it wasn't a lot of people.

Michael Kranish: Well, the presidential campaign is very similar.

John O'Donnell: Yeah.

Michael Kranish: You know, a few people.

John O'Donnell: Right.

Michael Kranish: So that some people have noted that, sure. This question, I think you've answered in your book already but I'll read it to you anyway just to be complete. "Why was the Taj so messed up at the start with a messy opening? How much was the result of those guys being killed in the helicopter crash?" I think you said in the book clearly what you told Trump. And that is you don't think it would have been messed up had they survived.

John O'Donnell: Right.

Michael Kranish: I guess the real question here is how much of this can be attributed to Trump's inattention and the

way he was just angry all the time. In other words, regardless, he was the person responsible. How much of that is his fault?

John O'Donnell: Well, yeah, I think that's kind of the whole point of it all because he doesn't take responsibility for anything. And so, anything that goes wrong back then or anything that goes wrong in the future, somebody else is going to be blamed for it. I mean, that is who he is.

Michael Kranish: Okay. Let me just see if there's anything else that I promised that I would ask. The first question you just talked about, and that is his views on race. So you've talked about that. And the second question here was the name of that accountant. You've just looked that up for us so we're going to get that. Just a couple other questions from someone else saying, "There's a Trump executive quoted in some other book that calls Trump's financial strategy just a big shell game, leveraging one billing, going into another." I know you write about this. But anything else that comes to mind?

John O'Donnell: No. It was even that or it's business for business. I think he was paying too much for the things like the yacht.

Michael Kranish: Okay. The rest I'm pretty sure you've already answered. I'm sure there'll be something else that comes up that I didn't think to ask you. But I think I've asked you all the questions that I have for now.

