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Lessons From the Trump-Troller in Chief

If Republicans want to know how to get under the GOP front-runner's skin, they should follow the example set by their least favorite role model: President Obama.

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SIMI VALLEY, Calif.—When it comes to giving as good as he's gotten from the Donald Trump insult machine, there is one person Republican presidential rivals could learn from as they prepare for Wednesday's debate.

Unfortunately for them, it's someone from whom GOP candidates would prefer not to learn anything: President Obama.

In his remarks at the 2011 White House Correspondents Dinner, Obama became the nation's Trump-troller in chief, spending a solid two and a half minutes (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9mzJhvC-8E>) ridiculing the celebrity businessman. The speech came just after Obama had released the “long form” of his birth certificate, deflating supposed news from the “team of investigators” Trump had dispatched to Hawaii to research the matter.

“I know that he's taken some flak lately, but no one is happier, no one is prouder to put this birth-certificate matter to rest than The Donald,” Obama said as Trump sat at a table in the ballroom, not laughing, just yards away.

“And that’s because he can finally get back to focusing on the issues that matter—like, did we fake the moon landing? What really happened in Roswell? And where are Biggie and Tupac?” Obama said.

Former White House speechwriter Jon Favreau was part of the team that put together Obama’s remarks that night. “I sat behind Trump during the Obama portion and watched him seethe,” Favreau told *National Journal*. “Thus far, no Republican candidate has been able to provoke that reaction from Trump.”

A top White House staffer said privately that was because the GOP opponents, particularly former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, have hit back with attacks on Trump’s positions on taxes and other policy matters, rather than using humor to diminish Trump’s credibility. (Trump’s campaign did not immediately respond to a request for comment for this story.)

Bush, as he counters Trump’s accusation that he is “low-energy,” has pointed out Trump’s support for higher taxes, his political contributions to Democratic candidates, and his praise for Hillary Clinton to question Trump’s Republican credentials.

In the 2011 speech, Obama lampooned Trump’s role on his reality TV show, *Celebrity Apprentice*, and in particular an episode in which a cooking team performed poorly. “There was a lot of blame to go around. But you, Mr. Trump, recognized that the real problem was a lack of leadership. And so ultimately, you didn’t blame Lil’ Jon or Meatloaf,” Obama said to laughter. “You fired Gary Busey. And these are the kind of decisions that would keep me up at night.”

The irony, Favreau pointed out, was that the speech came the very day Obama had ordered the risky Special Operations raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan.

Obama, of course, had huge advantages going after Trump that night. He was the sitting president speaking at a formal affair where Trump couldn’t immediately hit back. And even though he was running for reelection the following year, it’s doubtful whether any voters who accepted Trump’s premise that Obama was actually not born in the United States would ever support him at the polls. In contrast, all of Trump’s GOP rivals need Trump supporters eventually to back them, should they win the nomination. (It’s also unclear whether Bush, a policy wonk by nature, could match Obama’s comedic delivery.)

Still, Favreau said Obama's jabs worked because they "mocked the very idea that a clownish, loudmouth reality TV star actually believed he had the qualifications to run for president," and Republicans should be able to find a way to use that same message.

"Point is, nearly every candidate's attack on Trump has ranged from whiny and overly serious to small and mean," Favreau said. "If one of them can't get some laughs out of exposing the absurdity of a narcissistic reality-show host running for president, they deserve to lose."