



Trump and Arpaio: the bromance that led to the presidency and a pardon

During Donald Trump's campaign, Joe Arpaio joked about how much the two had in common. In the end the president prized loyalty over legal procedure

Terry Greene Sterling and Jude Joffe-Block

Sunday 27 August 2017 02.00 EDT

In early August, the 85-year-old Arizona lawman once known around the world as “America’s toughest sheriff” sat in his lonely private office, trying to puzzle out how to get his dire predicament noticed by his friend, President Donald Trump.

Former Maricopa County sheriff Joe Arpaio, who policed Arizona’s most populous county from 1993 to 2016 with theatrical stunts that included rounding up hapless Mexican immigrants, housing inmates in tent jails and forcing them to wear pink boxer shorts, was in trouble.

A few weeks before, Arpaio had been convicted of a federal crime - criminal contempt of court for defying a judicial order to stop his infamous immigration patrols. Arpaio faced up to

six months in prison at his October sentencing.

The only thing that could save him was a presidential pardon.

Arpaio and Trump had forged a special bond during the presidential campaign. Their mutual admiration was bolstered by their similar world views and personalities. Each saw the other as a misunderstood American hero beset upon by destructive leftists, and they remained steadfastly loyal friends during times of political toxicity. Both flaunted their authority to gain approbation from the same fervent base, which includes conservative and mainstream Republicans, bikers, white nationalists and white supremacists. Both showed contempt for unfriendly federal judges.

They shared scorn for unauthorized Mexican immigrants. They adhered to debunked conspiracy theories like the notion that Barack Obama's birth certificate was forged. They sought a symbiotic but hostile relationship with mainstream media, and displayed unwavering affection for fringe neo-conservative media outlets like Breitbart News and the conspiracy-theory website Infowars.

In early August, an Infowars story written by a fellow "birther" put forth Arpaio's predicament. "Where is Trump?" Sheriff Arpaio Asks. The president got the message.

On 25 August, Trump gave his pal Arpaio a presidential pardon, sparking outrage and joy in a bitterly divided nation.

The Trump-Arpaio bromance began two years ago, just weeks after Trump entered the crowded Republican presidential primary. Trump picked Arpaio's city, Phoenix, Arizona, the epicenter for the nation's immigration battles, as the backdrop for his first large scale campaign event. It was billed as a rally against illegal immigration. Shortly before that Trump had announced his candidacy in an explosive speech, accusing Mexican immigrants of being rapists and criminals.

Polls showed Trump in a dead heat for first place in the pool of 16 candidates that day in July 2015. So it was a help when Arpaio, then the powerful local sheriff and the country's most famous immigration hawk, introduced Trump at the rally. Arpaio told the crowd of thousands that a "quirk of fate" brought the two men to the same stage, since they had "a bunch of things in common". He said they both "investigated" Obama's birth certificate, they both vehemently opposed illegal immigration, and they were both born on 14 June, an American holiday called Flag Day.

Outside the rally, a diverse crowd of civil rights protesters assembled in the summer heat, pointing out what they viewed as the similarities between the two. They held posters depicting Arpaio and Trump as racists.



Local immigrants rights organizations protest the pardoning of Joe Arpaio in Phoenix, Arizona, on 25 August. Photograph: Caitlin O'Hara/Reuters

In the months that followed, Trump's popularity surged. Arpaio continued to stump for his new friend at rallies, and traveled to the Midwestern state of Iowa before primary voting began, to formally endorse his friend.

Trump was pleased. "This is a man when we talk about borders, this is a man that believes in borders and getting his endorsement means a lot to me," he told the Washington Post.

Arpaio said he once visited Trump in his private jet, and admired Trump's gold inflight commode.

The two relished hammering the Obama administration for lax immigration enforcement. But Arpaio's own efforts to crack down on illegal immigration locally had landed him in the legal mess that led to his criminal conviction.

In the mid 2000s, Arpaio understood that his base wanted to see politicians take on illegal immigration, just as Trump would detect the same passion as a presidential candidate. Arpaio's deputies launched so-called "saturation patrols", arresting large numbers of unauthorized immigrants identified during traffic stops.

In 2008, a group of Latino drivers filed an ambitious lawsuit alleging Arpaio's zealous traffic stops unfairly targeted Latinos, including US citizens. After lengthy legal proceedings a federal judge ruled in 2013 that Arpaio's office had engaged in systematic, unconstitutional racial profiling.

Even after the judge's ruling was upheld by a higher court, Arpaio signaled to his base and employees that he had done nothing wrong.



Joe Arpaio displays a prisoner uniform, in 1997. Photograph: Scott Troyanos/AP

That July, Republicans met in Cleveland, Ohio, to nominate Trump as the party's presidential candidate. Arpaio appeared on the Republican national convention stage to praise his friend in front of a national audience. The sheriff, wearing his signature pistol-shaped tie clip, railed about immigration and border security, then thanked Trump for showing consistent concern about his cancer-stricken wife. Trump "never forgot to think of my wife and call her", Arpaio said.

The convention provided good exposure for Arpaio, who faced a tough re-election battle back in Arizona. He relied on fans from all over the country - many of them also Trump supporters - to send him campaign donations.

Then, just weeks before the November election, the Obama Department of Justice announced it would criminally prosecute Arpaio for disobeying the federal judge in the racial profiling case. For 17 months, Arpaio had ignored a court order forbidding him from detaining unauthorized immigrants who had not committed any crimes.

Arpaio characterized himself as the innocent victim of an Obama-led political vendetta punishing him for enforcing immigration law.

When voters cast their ballots, Arpaio was trounced by his Democratic opponent while Trump became president. Arpaio attended Trump's inaugural ceremonies, including a ball in which Trump and his wife Melania danced their first dance to Arpaio's favorite song, Frank Sinatra's My Way.

Eight months later, at the end of July, Arpaio was convicted of criminal contempt of court. And while many Arizonans expected Trump would eventually step in to pardon his pal, the White House remained silent for weeks.

Then, at a Phoenix rally on 22 August that drew 10,000, Trump hinted a pardon was coming and suggested Arpaio was wrongly convicted for "doing his job". The crowd of Trump-Arpaio supporters broke into wild applause as thousands outside protested the possible pardon.

The protests were in vain. So were the voices of Trump advisers, who reportedly suggested the president hold off on the unprecedented, controversial pardon. Arpaio hadn't been sentenced yet, and the courts had not addressed his appeals.

But, like Arpaio, Trump prized loyalty over legal procedure. His first presidential pardon, of his friend Joe Arpaio, was announced late on Friday afternoon. In the end, the two steadfast friends helped each other get what they craved. Arpaio helped Trump become president and Trump rescued Arpaio from punishment.

Terry Greene Sterling and Jude Joffe-Block are Phoenix-based journalists writing a book about Sheriff Joe Arpaio's crackdown on illegal immigration and the Latino-led movement that organized to stop him. Follow them on Twitter @tgsterling and @judejoffeblock

Since you're here ...

... we have a small favour to ask. More people are reading the Guardian than ever but advertising revenues across the media are falling fast. And unlike many news organisations, we haven't put up a paywall - we want to keep our journalism as open as we can. So you can see why we need to ask for your help. The Guardian's independent, investigative journalism takes a lot of time, money and hard work to produce. But we do it because we believe our perspective matters - because it might well be your perspective, too.

I appreciate there not being a paywall: it is more democratic for the media to be available for all and not a commodity to be purchased by a few. I'm happy to make a contribution so others with less means still have access to information. *Thomasine F-R.*

If everyone who reads our reporting, who likes it, helps fund it, our future would be much more secure. **For as little as \$1, you can support the Guardian - and it only takes a minute.**

Thank you.

Support the Guardian



Topics

- Donald Trump
- Trump administration
- US immigration
- US politics
- Arizona
- Phoenix
- features