

The Melania tapes bust the “Free Melania” myth

Description



First lady Melania Trump addresses

the Republican National Convention from the Rose Garden of the White House on August 25, 2020, in Washington, DC. Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images

Remember “Free Melania”?

It became [a meme and a hashtag](#) shortly after the first lady was caught on tape appearing to grimace at President Trump’s inauguration. The idea was that Melania Trump was an unwilling captor to her husband and his regime, deserving of pity and liberation, not criticism. It was all “part of a long-standing narrative in pop culture: the cheeky but also insistent assumption that the new first lady is the sad and sleepy heroine of a decidedly modern fairy tale,” as [Megan Garber wrote at the Atlantic](#) in 2017.

Now it’s 2020, approximately 10 trillion years later, and Melania herself has punched a big hole in that narrative.

On a tape secretly recorded in 2018 and [released Thursday night by CNN](#), the first lady complains to then-friend Stephanie Winston Wolkoff that the media is bothering her about the Trump administration’s policy of [separating migrant children from their parents](#) at the US border.

“They said, ‘Oh, what about the children, that they were separated?’ Give me a fucking break,” she says on the tape, according to the CNN transcript. “Where they were saying anything when Obama did

that?”

The Obama administration [did not](#), in fact, pursue a policy of separating children from their parents at the border. And Trump’s statements on the tape suggest that, far from secretly disapproving of her husband’s administration, she is actually on board with its aims and angry at those who criticize them. She’s also mad about the “liberal media,” who she believes are treating her unfairly.

Her chief of staff, Stephanie Grisham, dismissed the tape as a “clear attempt at relevance” by Wolkoff, who also recently published a book about her relationship with Melania. “The timing of this continues to be suspect — as does this never-ending exercise in self-pity and narcissism,” Grisham said.

But the tape offers a clearer picture into Trump’s inner life than the American people have ever gotten. And in that picture, she’s not an innocent damsel in distress. Instead, she’s dismissive of the lives and rights of immigrant children, and resentful and angry at anyone who would criticize her for it. Ultimately, she’s a lot like her husband.

Americans have always projected what they want to see onto Melania

Melania Trump has always been something of a blank slate. She makes few public statements, and when she does, she’s often terse and hard to read — a polar opposite of her husband’s often logorrheic bluster. During one of her first big moments on the national stage, her speech at the 2016 Republican National Convention, she actually used someone else’s words rather than her own — [Michelle Obama’s, to be exact](#), an instance of plagiarism for which she and the Trump campaign were heavily criticized. But that plagiarism also prevented Americans from knowing much about the real Melania.

Americans have had to read into her clothes — a [pussy-bow blouse](#) after her husband was caught on tape bragging about his ability to grab women “by the pussy”; a [suffragist whitesuit](#) at the 2018 State of the Union; a jacket reading [“I really don’t care, do u?”](#) while visiting a child detention center. Or they’ve had to speculate based on her facial expressions, like that famous frown at the inauguration, or her body language, like the time she appeared to swat her husband’s hand away during a [2017 visit to Israel](#).

Often, that speculation has centered on Melania’s possible hatred for her husband. At the inauguration, [Jezebel’s Ashley Feinberg joked](#), “we all had a very nice and good time welcoming in our new president, Donald J. Trump. But of all the many, many happy people in attendance, no one was happier to be there than his loving wife [who certainly does not hate him](#), Melania Knauss Trump.”

But some went beyond the idea that Melania harbored distaste for her husband, to joke (or maybe not joke) that she was actually begging for release. As Garber reported, signs at the 2017 Women’s March included messages like “MELANIA: BLINK TWICE IF YOU NEED HELP.”

Such messages had a darker undertone given that more than 20 women have reported sexual misconduct by the president, and that his ex-wife Ivana Trump once [said that he raped her](#) (she later said she did not mean this in a “criminal sense”). This history has [led to questions](#) about whether Trump has been abusive to Melania.

But there’s also been an element of wish fulfillment to liberals’ “free Melania” memes — a hope,

perhaps, that the person in some ways closest to Trump might actually think he sucks. The idea of a secret sleeper agent within the White House, signaling to outsiders with pussy bows and cryptic expressions, has been appealing to those looking for any reason to be hopeful during the Trump administration.

There's also more than a little sexism in the idea that Melania Trump must be a victim, as [Vox's Alex Abad-Santos has noted](#). It assumes that she lacks agency in her relationship and her position as first lady, and also, perhaps, that a woman simply couldn't hold the same views President Trump does.

As it turns out, the latter isn't true.

The tape is a rare opportunity to hear Melania speak for herself

On the tape, recorded in summer 2018 when the Trump administration's policy of family separation was causing widespread outrage, Melania Trump argues that actually, the conditions for migrant children in detention at the border are quite good.

"The kids, they say, 'Wow I will have my own bed? I will sleep on the bed? I will have a cabinet for my clothes?' It's so sad to hear it, but they didn't have that in their own countries, they sleep on the floor," she tells Wolkoff on the tape.

She also claims that mothers and children lie about being persecuted in Mexico so they can get asylum in the US: "A lot of like moms and kids they are taught how to do it. They go over and they say, like, 'Oh, we will be killed by a gang member, we will be, you know, it's so dangerous.'"

"They could easily stay in Mexico," she goes on, "but they don't want to stay in Mexico because Mexico doesn't take care of them the same as America does."

On the tape, Melania also appears to reveal that her infamous "I really don't care" jacket, worn on a visit to a detention center in June 2018, was an effort to troll left-wingers. "I'm driving liberals crazy," she says, "and they deserve it." (She had [previously stated publicly](#) that the jacket was meant as a message "for the left-wing media who are criticizing me.")

Melania also complains on the tape about being asked about family separation while she was trying to plan the White House Christmas decorations, which she also did not care for ("who gives a fuck about the Christmas stuff and decorations?"). She also complains that she's being unfairly treated in the media, claiming that she tried to reunite a migrant child and mother but "they would not do the story because they're against us because they are liberal media."

Sound familiar?

There are moments on the tape where Melania appears to resent being lumped together with her husband. "They say I'm complicit, I'm the same like him, I support him," she says at one point. "I don't say enough, I don't do enough."

But overall, the sense is of a first lady who is on board with her husband's policy and believes in the ideas behind it: that immigrants are fraudulently coming to the US to take advantage of its supposedly generous welfare state, that they must be stopped, and that children at the border are actually lucky to

be held in the comparatively palatial conditions of a US detention center.

Moreover, the Melania captured on the tape is someone who actually has a lot in common with her husband — someone who feels aggrieved and mistreated by a “liberal media” that never acknowledges her accomplishments. As she says, “they’re against us.” It’s the same message Trump has repeated throughout his presidency, as when he [claimed in 2017](#) that “no politician in history, and I say this with great surety, has been treated worse or more unfairly” by the media.

By not saying very much, Melania Trump has allowed liberals to project their own fantasies, and sometimes their own biases, onto her. But now that she’s been caught speaking in an unguarded moment, the reality appears far more prosaic: The woman who married Donald Trump, campaigned with him, lives in the White House with him, and has never once publicly spoken out against him despite probably knowing more about him than anyone else, is actually a lot like Donald Trump. Imagine that.