

## Donald Trump's future is a *Prairie Home Companion*

When President Trump leaves office in January, what will he do next? The common theory, circulating since his 2016 campaign, is he'll launch some sort of media venture.



President Trump, Rudy Giuliani, and Stephen Miller. Illustrated | Getty Images, iStock, Alamy Stock Photo

That still strikes me as probable, but after half a decade of Trump dominating our national life, I think it safe to venture a more specific prediction: He may well start a *Prairie Home Companion*-style project which fills the hole in right-wing media soon to be left by talk radio titan Rush Lim-

baugh.

The major weakness of the Trump TV idea was always its format. It is impossible to imagine Trump, who is well-known for maintaining a light schedule, putting on a nightly show. He is not suited to be the next Tucker Carlson, delivering a tightly written monologue before interviewing other people to highlight their ideas. Beyond the sheer amount of work it would entail, the president generally does not like reading from teleprompters and is not terribly interested in promoting anyone but himself. He wouldn't enjoy a production, like Carlson's, in which he talks to one or two other people from behind a desk in a quiet studio. None of that is Trump's thing.

Trump's thing is crowds. Big crowds, roaring crowds, crowds who love him and on whose energy he can feed as he riffs freely about whatever comes to mind without the inhibition of schedules and commercial breaks and having to pretend like a guest is more interesting than he is. He reportedly has already begun telling aides in private he would like to continue holding large rallies after he is no longer president, and the rallies will undoubtedly be successful, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic winds down.

During his campaign, Trump rally "*tickets*" served to collect friendly voter data and estimate attendance. They were always free, because it doesn't make sense for a campaign — especially one so insistent on conflating local crowd size with nationwide support — to erect any barriers to attendance. Without a campaign, though, Trump could charge people to see him. If ticket sales are low, it's an "*intimate evening with the former president*." If they're high, it's a "*massive stadium event for thousands of Americans who support our REAL leader*." Either way, money's coming in.

But there could be more money. Why not combine the rallies with the long-rumored media venture? Think of it as a political version of the *Prairie Home Companion* tours Garrison Keillor used to run before his retirement and subsequent misconduct allegations. Keillor's home base for the weekly recording was in Minnesota, but often he'd take the show on the road, playing venues from coast to coast. There was always an audience who purchased tickets plus the secondary income stream from the radio broadcast.

Trump might even copy portions of the *Prairie Home* format. Keillor would have guests write brief greetings to family and friends listening at home as they made their way to their seats, then read some portion of them after intermission, adding a little commentary of his own. Consider it a slightly more sophisticated version of Trump's penchant for responding to yells from his crowds. I doubt he'd get into the full *Prairie Home* storytelling mode, with voice actors and sound effects, but he loves play-acting little stories on his own. I could even see musical guests or interviews becoming a regular feature, likely as warm-ups for Trump rather than anything in which he'd personally participate. A *Trumpy Home Companion* would instantly become the show to land for right-wing political authors with a forthcoming book launch.

That's especially so if the present *Trumpworld* revolt against *Fox News* continues and Limbaugh's lung cancer forces him off air. Limbaugh's considerable and committed audience, if looking for a new weekly media routine, would be the perfect base for Trump's venture. The once-weekly schedule of Trump's traveling act would leave plenty of time slots open for other shows under the same aegis, should Trump choose to develop them, as dedicated talk radio listeners tune in daily, sometimes for hours on end.

The only thing left to decide is the stage setting. Keillor used to perform in front of a façade of a little stick-built house, lit to look like it stood near trees shadowed by a streetlamp on a warm summer evening in a small prairie town. You know, loser stuff, per Trump's aesthetic.

Maybe the set would instead be a mock *Oval Office*, the seat the Democrats stole from him, the seat he should have — but you know, folks, he'd much rather be here with you in beautiful Duluth, Minnesota, right? (applause) We all know what really happened in the election, the Democrat fraud election, I like to call it. (applause) We all know this is Trump country, right? You voted for your president, right? (applause) Of course you did, of course you did, because all the men here are so strong, and all the women are so good-looking I could kiss them, and all the children, people are saying, all the Minnesota children — outside that nasty "*Squad*" district down in Socialist Minneapolis — all the children are so above-average.