



[News](#) >> [National](#)

Jake Tapper: From Jewish Day School Troublemaker To Trump's Worst Nightmare

By **Nathan Guttman**

February 19, 2017 [Edit](#)

[Getty Images](#)

CNN anchor Jake Tapper got his own [“Saturday Night Live”](#) skit last week. In a “Fatal Attraction”-style scene, the fierce newsman is seduced by Kellyanne Conway, the White House aide he had banned from his show for lying.

In the Trump age, when the commander-in-chief sets his Saturday schedule around the show, being lampooned by SNL is a sign that a power player, whether politician or journalist, has arrived. Tapper took it in stride, tweeting that the skit was “funny.”

The presidential campaign and Trump's ascendance to the White House helped Tapper, a journalist already known for speaking truth to power, to find his own distinct voice. He is on a crusade to eradicate falsehoods and “alternative facts” from government's discourse with the media, even if it means getting into televised shouting matches with the president's closest advisers.

Those who knew the 47-year-old anchor of CNN's “The Lead” back at Jewish day school just outside Philadelphia are not surprised to see where Tapper ended up. He has always been this way: outspoken, irreverent and very, very confident. This is a man who has never been in the habit of taking “no” from authority as the last word, even when it came down to the details of his high school's dress code, a classmate and summer camp friend said.

“He was unafraid to challenge the authority structure,” said Hazan Harold Messinger, the spiritual leader of a Philadelphia-area synagogue who runs the music program. “He was unafraid, and when I watch him on TV and I smile, I see that quality has completely carried him to where he is now.”

Tapper was class president and prankster-in-chief, and as he evolved into one of America's leading broadcast journalists, qualities that may have annoyed his teachers — whom Tapper, a talented cartoonist, caricatured in the yearbook — have turned out to be valuable professional traits.

Indeed, the man chose one pungent word to describe himself in an interview with the Philadelphia Inquirer more than 15 years ago: “obnoxious.”

That's come in handy as he patiently, but relentlessly, tears down false claims presented by Trump and his White House. Setting aside politeness and journalistic objectivity, Tapper seems to have been preparing for this role all his life.

“He is tough, funny, self-deprecating, confrontational, warm and relentless,” said David Plotz, the former editor of Slate, who has known Tapper for decades. “Long before this Trump business, I admired him as a journalist for his intelligence and toughness. A bit of an ego. A bit prickly. But so what! He's really an excellent journalist and, in my experience, a really menschy person.”

On February 7, Tapper the newsman made headlines himself for an [interview](#) with Conway in which he listed inaccurate statements of the president's and shouted “False!” after each one.

“How about the president's statements that are false, like the murder rate is the highest it's been in half a century? False!” Tapper said.

He was born in Staten Island. When he was young his parents divorced, and Jake split his time between their homes in the Philadelphia area. His upbringing was fiercely Jewish: He attended high school at Akiba Hebrew Academy, a pluralistic Jewish day school now known as the Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy, and Camp Ramah, which is where he first met Messinger in the early 1980s.

A graduate of Dartmouth, like his father, journalism wasn't Tapper's first career choice. But after attending film school he discovered that following the news and current affairs is fun. Tapper was hired as the press secretary for Rep. Marjorie Margolies, a Democrat now better known as Chelsea Clinton's mother-in-law. “He could put together a press release faster than anyone else and it would be brilliant,” Margolies recalled. And more important, “he always made me laugh and always kept everyone in the office with a smile.”

From that point on it was Washington life and politics for Tapper, who soon crossed the line from PR to journalism with a gig at the Washington City Paper, moving on from there to the online magazine Salon, then to ABC News and landing finally at CNN.

“I’d say he gave ambition a good name,” ABC News journalist John Donvan said. “He came in knowing almost nothing about how TV was done, and worked his butt off to figure it out. True, he had elbows, but his work was always distinct and interesting and he cared a carload whether he was right.”

And while his career brought about many exclusive stories, broadcasts from conflict zones and piercing interviews, many remember Tapper for one tell-all story back in January 1998: “I dated Monica Lewinsky.” Tapper went out with the famed White House intern once, weeks before the affair carrying her name broke out and took over America’s headlines.

“She was cute, if a little zaftig. And friendly. And nice,” he wrote. “Physically, she was pleasant without being overwhelming. She’s a little chubby, but she’s leaps and bounds prettier than that vacuous mug shot beamed all over the world.” Tapper mentioned time and again in the article his disdain for this type of journalism, before diving into a detailed account of every moment in the one-date relationship.

At Salon, Tapper developed his unique style in covering politics, throwing aside niceties in favor of sentences like “Gore: Still unlikable. Bush: Still dumb. Feels like a tie,” when covering a 2000 presidential debate. Cable news forced him to adopt a more moderate language, but the message remained similar: Politicians, even the highest-ranking ones, are not immune to questioning and criticism.

As the shadow of Trump began to loom over the political system, Tapper tried to brush off media excitement with the newly found ratings machine and tackle the New York billionaire’s statements and policies. He took on Trump’s campaign call to ban the entry of all Muslims to the United States. This would become a recurring theme in Tapper’s coverage of the elections and later the White House - probing Trump and his people in an attempt to draw them out on their approach to Muslims and their claim of a vast extremist Muslim plot against America.



WATCH: Jake Tapper's Best Moments (So Far) Under Trump

Daniel J. Solomon February 8, 2017 Edit

This sensitivity to minority rights could go back to Tapper’s Jewish upbringing and education. He often mentions his Jewish education and attended Washington’s Adas Israel synagogue, a Conservative congregation where many of the city’s Jewish movers and shakers mix religious observance with political networking, before joining the Reform Temple Micah.

In 2006, Tapper married Jennifer Marie Brown, who has worked as an organizer for Planned Parenthood, in her home state of Missouri, according to their New York Times wedding announcement.

After the birth of their first child, a daughter, in 2007, they moved into a four-story house in D.C.'s tony Rock Creek Park neighborhood and granted a tour to a local interior design website that revealed more details about his family than any other interview he has given: It revealed that the couple met during the 2004 Iowa Caucus and made plans to have dinner back home in Washington the following night.

“After that first dinner with him, I knew something was going to happen,” Jennifer Tapper told the website. They held their wedding in President Truman’s Kansas City, Missouri, men’s club, and now have two children.

Jake Tapper’s brother’s wife, Rabbi Laurie Hahn Tapper, officiated at their wedding; Tapper’s brother Aaron Hahn Tapper founded Abraham’s Vision, an educational organization in Brooklyn that aimed to foster understanding among American Jewish, Palestinian and Muslim communities. He is a professor of Jewish studies at the University of San Francisco.

A CNN spokesperson would not make Tapper available for comment to the Forward.

Back in his Akiba Hebrew Academy days, Tapper was more about the mischief than about studying. Years later, fellow students and teachers still remember him clearly: some because he was class president, others for his cartooning talent (in the school paper and on the gym wall), but most for the pranks. And it was the end-of-year prank that made him famous schoolwide. Tapper drew an elaborate cartoon for the school’s senior yearbook. But when folded over (as in Mad magazine cartoons), the page commemorating the school’s 40th anniversary revealed a penis. Tapper was suspended and required to do 75 hours of community service, but was allowed to graduate.

“We were all obnoxious,” said Uri Monson, Tapper’s school buddy and camp Ramah bunkmate. “We were confident that we were the smartest people in the room.” Monson, now the chief financial officer of Philadelphia’s public school district, remained close to Tapper. He traces back Tapper’s iconic facial expressions to his days in school, as he’d roll his eyes at teachers. “There’s more politics in his snarkiness,” Monson said.

All joking aside, Messinger thinks Akiba might have helped Tapper develop his famous chutzpah.

Of course, it wasn’t all fun and games for Tapper’s teachers. Some of them weren’t so amused by the caricatures he drew of them for the yearbook (much less by the phallic centerfold.) And Tapper apologized for his arrogance “years later, and for years” to his 12th-grade history teacher, Sharon Levin.

“They were the smartest class I have ever taught,” recounted Levin, now the head of school but at the time a 12th-grade history teacher in her first year at Akiba. “They gave me a run for my money.”

Tapper has returned to Akiba several times since. In 2012, giving a commencement speech, Tapper spoke about “Six Things I Wish I’d Known At Age 18,” in which he urged graduates to “take a chance on yourself” and follow their dreams, just like he followed his dream of becoming a journalist despite some early setbacks.

And after publishing several nonfiction books, Tapper is now on his way to rolling out his first novel. “The Hellfire Club,” scheduled to come out in the summer of 2018, is a thriller set in the 1950s in Washington. Its heroes are, naturally, politicians.

Jake Tapper initiates Curt Schilling into the mysteries of Jewish nationalism, tribal affiliation and political identity.

WATCH: A Mystified Curt Schilling Asks Jake Tapper Why Jews Are Democrats

Helen Chernikoff October 22, 2016 Edit

Contact Nathan Guttman at guttman@forward.com or on Twitter, [@nathanguttman](https://twitter.com/nathanguttman)

The Forward's independent journalism depends on donations from readers like you. Now you can **double your donation!** Simply donate \$120 or more and your gift will be matched dollar for dollar.

Support the Forward

Tagged as: kellyanne conway, abc, cnn, donald trump, jake tapper, monica lewinsky

Author

Nathan Guttman

Nathan Guttman, staff writer, is the Forward's Washington bureau chief. He joined the staff in 2006 after serving for five years as Washington correspondent for the Israeli dailies Haaretz and The Jerusalem Post. In Israel, he was the features editor for Ha'aretz and chief editor of Channel 1 TV evening news. He was born in Canada and grew up in Israel. He is a graduate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.



Copyright ©2018 The Forward Association, Inc. All rights reserved. | [Contact](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Trademarks](#) | [About](#) |

[Jobs](#)

