

He's a Trump supporter who threatened officials over 2020 election. I asked him why.

Mark Anthony Rissi is an Iowa man who threatened election officials in Arizona over the 2020 results. He still believes Trump won. Nothing can change that. I asked him why.

William Proctor, Opinion contributor USA Today October 30, 2023

It was a gamble, a simple phone call to a stranger – one who happened to be headed to federal prison.

Mark Anthony Rissi lives in Iowa, I in Michigan. In a nearly hour-long conversation, I discovered we're both Vietnam-era veterans, both widowed in recent years. He's 65, retired, disabled from injuries suffered over three decades in the construction business. I'm a former police officer and retired television reporter, now 75 years young.

I had read that he was sentenced to two and a half years for his involvement in the ongoing election-denial frenzy that followed the 2020 presidential election and the Capitol riots on Jan. 6, 2021. He wasn't a participant in the Capitol assault, but feels the rioters were unjustly charged with crimes.

Rissi's conviction stemmed from threatening phone calls he made to government officials in another state. And like others similarly accused, he had been exposed to his share of unflattering publicity. So I was stunned when he answered the phone and agreed to chat.

I chose to call Mark because I wanted unfettered opinions from a person who knew nothing about my 33-year history as a journalist in metro Detroit. I wanted to hear what drove a man to threaten another person over politics. I hoped for a breakthrough in our exchange of information and beliefs, that just maybe I'd hear a softening of the mean spirit that drove the action that will land him behind bars for the first time in his life.

Mark Anthony Rissi isn't so different from half of America

Rissi isn't so different, in some ways, from half the U.S. population. He's a longtime Republican whose disdain for what he calls the sorry state of America, and the Democrats he blames for it, is

deeply ingrained. Yet he targeted Clint Hickman, the Republican chairman of the Maricopa County Supervisors in Arizona, and later, then-Attorney General of Arizona Mark Brnovich.

After Hickman announced in September 2021 that the results of an audit of the 2020 election showed the process was fair, that there was no fraud, despite Donald Trump-led claims to the contrary, Rissi called Hickman to demand he stop lying and do his job.

Rissi was recorded via voicemail, according to prosecutors, saying, “When we come to lynch your stupid, lying commie (expletive), you'll remember that you lied on the (expletive) Bible, you piece of (expletive)! You're gonna die, you piece of (expletive)! We're going to hang you!”

Months later, in December, Rissi made another call, this time threatening to hang Brnovich.

As I read Rissi’s story, I considered the question that causes me chest pains almost daily: What should we, and more important I, do to save the country from the ultimate threat of destruction from within?

The MAGA folks are blind to the fact that trust in our system is required to keep our capitalist, free society afloat, and that wearing long guns and threatening Americans you disagree with leads to actions and decisions that rip the fiber of the republic to shreds. If we’re not talking – instead of yelling at one another – and negotiating points of view, our doom is on the horizon. The hope in what and who we are is lost.

The daunting answer, I decided, was a simple proposal tried by many others: Let’s talk to each other. Maybe one on one, I could reach a man who had been told not to listen to liberal media, because reporters like me are the enemy of the people.

After reading Rissi’s rage-filled words, I wondered to myself: Is it possible to talk this guy out of the hateful quicksand he lives in?

Then I read what he told the judge before he was sentenced. In a written plea, he claimed to be in “a weakened emotional state” at the time of the first threatening call. The death of his mother had left him depressed. He had his own medical issues and was “inundated with misinformation and exaggerations regarding the election process in Arizona.”

But at the August hearing, was he really acknowledging that misinformation, not election fraud, had fueled his aggression, or did he hope to reduce the number of months he'd spend behind bars? And what would he say now, on the phone to a stranger?

Excuses, but no contrition. Angry, but unrepentant.

So he'd know a little about me, I sent him to seekingjusticebp.com, my website on my work helping to free the wrongfully convicted. I'm still a reporter at heart. When Rissi requested to read what I wrote before publication, I agreed.

"I used a bad choice of words" in the voice message to "this Hickman character," he told me. "Apparently, I was suffering from PTSD, because I don't remember the phone call."

A series of surgeries on a knee, a shoulder and a bad hip had added to Rissi's burden, he explained. His back has a broken implanted metal frame because his bones are disintegrating. Sitting next to his dying mother for two weeks didn't help his emotional "control," Rissi added. In Florida with his mother, he had been taking muscle relaxers and morphine twice a day for the pain in his knee. He also said he had listened to his brother complain about the "crooked" election in Arizona.

Nine months later, he said, the FBI questioned him: "I told them I remember calling the attorney general, but I don't remember calling anybody else."

Excuses, but not contrition.

Then, for a moment, he turned his speculation toward me.

"If you're calling me to find out why I was confused about who won the election, then you've reached a dead end, because I know who won in 2020 and it wasn't Joe Biden," Rissi said. "Misinformation? Was I improperly convicted? The DOJ came after me with hammer and tongs, tried to get one of my children to get a confession out of me. They didn't succeed."

He continued, returning the focus to politics.

"I've been more an independent much of my life," Rissi said, "but if you asked me today if I'm a Republican I'd say hell no, because they're all a bunch of traitors, a bunch of wimps."

Wimps? I wondered why he used that label to describe the party that fought so hard against the very election results he still refuses to accept.

“They need more evidence to impeach Joe Biden? How much more do they need?” he answered. “I mean, they didn’t need any evidence to impeach Donald Trump twice!”

Did he watch or listen to the hearings?

“The impeachment hearings? I watched everything, all the hearings in the last five years,” Rissi told me. “So they impeach Trump for calling Ukraine and asking, ‘Can you explain some corruption to me?’ ”

He went on: “The only reason they’re after Trump is because he’s after them!”

I wanted to step in with a question or challenge, at this point, but he was on a roll:

“They’re trying to stop Trump because he’s going to get 100 million votes, even if they send him to prison. I think they’re gonna kill him, because whoever they put up (to run against Trump), they’re gonna get slaughtered. And then, it’s retribution time.

“I predict they’ll crash a plane into his plane, or it will be the old, lone gunman with three names – Lee Harvey Oswald, James Earl Ray. You think I sound like a conspiracy theorist?”

I think I just laughed, not wanting to offend him. But yes, I thought he sounded like a thoroughly programmed believer, trained to say it’s The Other’s fault.

But Rissi wants people to know that he’s not a bad guy.

“I don’t use drugs, I don’t steal stuff, I don’t hurt people,” Rissi said.

The future of America

We didn’t get into how threats to politicians can hurt people, beyond their intended target on the other end of the phone. He scoffed at Hickman’s testimony to the court about how Hickman and his family had been terrorized by right-wing demonstrators outside of his home.

“I wasn’t there. I didn’t know the guy,” Rissi said, apparently making no connection between the intimidation and his own behavior.

The judge gave Rissi four months between sentencing and reporting to prison. If hip replacement surgery this month goes well, he’ll report to federal prison before Thanksgiving. Because of the surgery, he was worried about which federal penitentiary he will be ordered to serve his time in. As he prepares to await the results of the next election from behind bars, I asked Rissi for his thoughts about the future of America.

“If we don’t right the ship, it’s gonna sink,” he said. “It’s the madness over equity and inclusivity, and not about Black people, white or LGBTQ. It’s all being used by those in power to divide us and destroy us. There’s a whole lot of people like me who know what’s going on. There’s a whole lot of people like me who are terrified of what can happen to you when you speak up. They see what happens when you push back.”