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INSIDE THE LINCOLN PROJECT'S WAR AGAINST TRUMP

Progressives are wary of the conservative group hammering the President, but its founders say they're fighting for all Americans.

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The Project stockpiles material that can be aimed at Trump at the ideal moment. Illustration by David Plunkert; source photographs from The Lincoln Project / YouTube



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The week of Labor Day, the founders of the Lincoln Project, a super PAC of Republican operatives who have disavowed their own party in order to defeat President Donald Trump, set up a war room in a location far outside Washington, D.C. Since January, the group, whose founders include the consultants Steve Schmidt and Rick Wilson, had been targeting Trump with the kind of merciless ads that the strategists had aimed at Democratic candidates throughout their careers. A spot titled “Regret” features the comedian David Cross offering such a long list of Trump’s flaws—“the blatant racism, and the crass sexism, and the deranged narcissism, and pandering to Nazis”—that the recitation is still unspooling as the ad fades out. This type of message is aimed at convincing Republican voters that Trump’s dangerous and divisive impulses imperil the country. Another type of ad is designed to unsettle a single viewer—the President himself—and often appears during TV programs he is likely to watch. “Shrinking” directly addresses Trump, saying, of his notorious Tulsa campaign rally, in June, “You’ve probably heard this before, but it was *smaller* than we expected.” The founders knew that they were getting to the President when he started tweeting and talking about them, predictably calling their organization the Losers Project.

The founders, who consider themselves Trump “anthropologists,” try to predict the President’s missteps, stockpiling material that can be deployed at the ideal moment. A recent spot, “P.O.W.,” contrasted images of honorable military service with Trump’s denigration of people in the armed forces. The ad debuted shortly before *The Atlantic* reported that Trump, during a 2018 trip to France, had refused to visit an American cemetery and had referred to the war dead as “suckers.” In the ensuing public outcry, the Lincoln Project tweeted, “Let’s show @realDonaldTrump what real heroes look like,” and asked its followers to tweet photographs of veterans, hashtagged #WeRespectVets. Within an hour, the hashtag had become the leading Politics topic on Twitter.

On September 9th, the group released an ad about the South Carolina senator Lindsey Graham, “Parasite,” in which gruesome footage of feasting maggots is accompanied by narration mocking Graham’s obeisance to Trump: “Parasites don’t care if they feed off a good host—or *an evil one*.” At one of the strategists’ regular morning meetings, Wilson—a gregarious Floridian, an aggressive adman, and the most likely of the founders to swear in public—said that a reporter had asked him, “What do you guys say when people think that you’re using the same harsh tactics and language that Trump uses?” Wilson said, “I was, like, ‘Who gives a fuck?’ I was, like, ‘Dude, *I’m* not running for President.’” Schmidt, who headed John McCain’s 2008 Presidential campaign and now elegantly eviscerates Trump on MSNBC, reminded the group that the President has insulted everyone from Gold Star families to disabled people. The Project had endorsed the Democratic candidate, Joe Biden, and was airing positive spots about him, with titles like “Decency.”

The founders discussed how to target their advertising in such swing states as Florida, Arizona, and Pennsylvania. Stuart Stevens, an adviser who has worked on five Presidential campaigns, suggested, “Basically, look at it like we’re running three governor’s races.” It would waste resources, he warned, to try “to boil the ocean.”

An excerpt of Bob Woodward’s new book, “Rage,” had reported that Trump knew about the deadliness of the coronavirus in early February yet went on to promise that the virus was going to “disappear.” The founders decided to tweet about Woodward’s news and to produce a short video about the revelation. As the group chatted, the Project’s communications director tweeted “#TrumpKnew.” The hashtag reached No. 1 before the meeting ended.

The Project, which was founded by eight people, now employs about thirty-five paid staffers. For the first months, everybody worked remotely—in Tallahassee, Denver, East Hampton, Sacramento. Once the war room was ready, more than a dozen employees began arriving at their assigned housing with luggage and pets, prepared to stay until November. The selection of a temporary headquarters had been complicated by the pandemic, but security was also a factor. Founders had been publicly accosted

for opposing Trump, and the Project had received menacing voice mails. A Las Vegas caller: “Get the fuck out of my country, bitches!” From Pennsylvania: “Fuck every last one of you motherfuckers! And when a civil war happens . . . duck.”

The filmmakers Fisher Stevens and Karim Amer, along with the producer Amy Redford, had arrived to shoot a documentary about the Project. Stevens, a Hollywood actor and a liberal activist, had wanted to make anti-Trump ads himself, but every time he had an idea for a spot he discovered that the Lincoln Project had already done it. “These guys were out there every day, putting out a movie!” he told me. “I thought, Who *are* these fucking people? Who is *doing* this stuff?”

The Project’s founders are a murderers’ row of conservative operatives. Wilson, who has worked for Rudolph Giuliani and Dick Cheney, counts hundreds of elections, from “dogcatcher to U.S. Senate,” that he and the other founders have helped Republicans win. Schmidt served in the George W. Bush White House, where he was instrumental in seating the Supreme Court Justices Samuel Alito and John Roberts. He is widely known for having suggested Sarah Palin as a running mate for McCain, in 2008. Schmidt clearly regrets choosing someone whose crude populism presaged Trump. He was a source for “Game Change,” a book about the McCain campaign that characterized Palin as unprepared and difficult; in September, he said that Palin represented “the beginning of the politics of cowardice and fear.”

Another founder, Reed Galen, whose father worked for Newt Gingrich and Dan Quayle, oversaw with Schmidt the reelection campaign of the California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. John Weaver, a Texan whom the Democratic strategist James Carville nicknamed Meat Cleaver Weaver, spent a decade trying to get McCain elected to the Presidency. Stuart Stevens was Mitt Romney’s chief strategist in the 2012 race against Barack Obama. A notable early Project participant was George Conway, the lawyer who antagonizes Trump on Twitter—“You. Are. Nuts.”—and whose wife, Kellyanne, was a top White House adviser until she resigned, in August. The couple, citing family demands, receded from public life, and George Conway quit the Project.

The consultant Sarah Longwell, who heads a group called Republican Voters Against Trump, said, of the leaders of the Lincoln Project, “They’ve very successfully tapped into the rage that a lot of people feel, including me.” The Project’s scorched-earth approach distinguishes it from similar organizations: the founders, some of whom have entirely shed their Republican identities, have left themselves no clear path of return. (Wilson and Schmidt are now registered Independents.) Longwell said, “In many ways, this is their last stand.”

Most of the Project’s core founders are in their fifties and came of age under Ronald Reagan. They were drawn to Reagan’s optimism and to his belief in fiscally responsible government, which, as Galen points out, “doesn’t necessarily mean lower taxes—it means being *smart* with taxpayers’ money.” Socially, they favor individual liberty: worship however you want, marry whomever you want. They support responsible gun ownership and a judiciously interventionist foreign policy. Weaver served in the Air Force, and Wilson worked in the Defense Department, but all the founders revere military service. In 2015, Trump disgusted them when he mocked McCain—a fighter pilot who was a P.O.W. during Vietnam—by saying, “I like people that *weren’t* captured.”

After Obama won his second term, the Republican National Committee commissioned a study that became known as the “autopsy report.” The country’s voting population was diversifying rapidly, and, the report said, young voters were “increasingly rolling their eyes at what the Party represents.” It noted, “Many minorities wrongly think that Republicans do not like them or want them in the country.” In a recent book, “It Was All a Lie,” Stevens writes, “How do you go from dedicating a political party to expansion and inclusiveness and two years later rally around a man who calls Mexicans ‘rapists,’ and called for a religious test to enter the United States?” He goes on, “For decades, conservatives attacked liberals for living by ‘situational ethics,’ but the ease

with which Republican leaders abandoned any pretense of being more than a whites-only party is the ultimate situational ethic.” In January, Wilson told Trevor Noah that Trump “has broken the Republican Party—it doesn’t believe in *anything*.” Stunningly, the 2020 Republican National Convention put forward no new platform, signalling that the Party’s sole position was fealty to Trump.

In 2017, Jennifer Horn, another Project founder, chose not to seek a third term as the chair of the Republican Party of New Hampshire, unable to countenance “a President and Party leadership that think the President himself is above the law.” She told me, “Look at the deficit spending since Trump took office—we’re supposed to be the party of *limited* spending. We’re the party of a strong national defense—we have a President who is colluding, basically, with foreign dictators.” When Trump was impeached, Horn said, she waited for Republican senators to uphold their constitutional oath, only to watch “each one fall”—except for Romney, who voted to convict. Senators who condemned Trump privately said nothing publicly. Schmidt told me, “You have an entire political class that is scared to death of being tweeted at or given a Presidential nickname.”

Mike Madrid, a founder who analyzes voting patterns, joined the G.O.P. as a young Latino with “the idea that it could lift my community up.” In the late nineties, he served as the political director of the Republican Party in California, his home state. He continued working for Republican causes, but, in 2016, he was mortified when colleagues and friends “somehow found the rationale” to support Trump, even after his vilification of immigrants.

When Schmidt publicly left the Party, in 2018, he tweeted that the Administration’s policy of separating migrant families at the border was “connected to the worst abuses of Humanity in our history,” including slavery, and said that the current G.O.P. represented a “danger to our democracy.” Galen’s long-held concerns about Trump intensified as he watched the President unleash unmarked officers on Black Lives Matter demonstrations. He told himself, “That’s about as anti-Republican as you can get—unfettered federal power, applied at the state level.” The Project’s sole millennial founder, Ron Steslow, a political strategist, has said, “My generation is being forced to learn that democracy cannot be taken for granted.”

The small number of Republicans who initially assembled the loose coalition now known as the Never Trump movement tended to represent certain interest areas, such as veterans’ affairs. No group had what Galen called “the skills or the willingness” to fight Trump publicly—or to convey explicitly the constitutional dangers of a second term. “He will be unrestrained,” Schmidt said. “And he will be validated.” The Project’s founders felt that the Democrats largely lacked killer instincts. Watching the primary debates, they were dismayed that the candidates rarely mentioned Trump; by focussing on liberal policy divides, they were doing little to win over Republicans.

The founders had been combatting Trump individually, through books, tweets, podcasts, op-eds, and TV appearances. Then, last fall, they decided to unite, in a move that Vox later compared to “Darth Vader, at the very last minute, switching sides to help Luke Skywalker defeat the Emperor.” On December 17th, they published a Times Op-Ed, written by Galen and bylined by Conway, Schmidt, Weaver, and Wilson, announcing the Lincoln Project’s aim to persuade “disaffected conservatives, Republicans and Republican-leaning independents” to vote Trump out. They also sought to remove Trump’s Senate “enablers,” even if it meant ceding Republican control of Congress, and to “salt the earth”—insuring that none of Trump’s children or other loyalists could become President.

Republicans have always invoked their connection to Abraham Lincoln, the Party’s first President; the Project sought to weaponize it. On February 27th, several of the founders appeared at Cooper Union, in the East Village, where, in 1860, Lincoln

delivered an address that urged the containment of slavery and the preservation of the Union, propelling him to the Presidency. His speech began with “the facts”; in his conclusion, he said, “Let us have faith that right makes might.” Exactly a hundred and sixty years later, Wilson stood at the same lectern that Lincoln had used and invoked a tough-guy monologue from the vigilante movie “Taken”: “We have, as the great political philosopher Liam Neeson once said, a particular set of skills—skills that make us a nightmare for people like Donald Trump.”

Wilson likes to say, “Democrats play to win an argument; I play to win an *election*.” His ads have historically been cutthroat: in 2008, he characterized Obama’s pastor, Jeremiah Wright, as a “preacher of hate.” In Wilson’s recent book, “Running Against the Devil,” a pointedly indecorous follow-up to his 2018 best-seller, “Everything Trump Touches Dies,” he calls out the President’s “enablers and ball-washers,” and describes Trump as “a dark, shitty monster” with “nanoscale raccoon-paw hands.” The book offers strategic advice on how Democrats could win in November: They must stop courting “woke Twitter” and become “cold-eyed, clearheaded operators” who put “electoral realities ahead of progressive fantasies.” Policy can be debated *after* Trump is gone. Democrats need to present relentless evidence of the President’s “corruption, vulgarity, dishonesty, broken promises, and failed policies.” Never forgetting that Trump’s team would “burn this country to the fucking ground” in order to win, they must choose combat over scholarly discourse: “This is a chain fight in a biker bar in Frogsass, Alabama.”

Other Project founders court unity in grander terms. Horn said, “My country is so much more important than my party. My optimism comes from the belief that the majority of Americans feel the same way.” At the Cooper Union event, Madrid joked, “I never thought it would be the political *consulting* class that would have to stand up for moral righteousness.”

Some progressives do not see the Project as righteous. They worry that its founders are pushing Democrats to repeat moral and tactical mistakes: tabling transformative proposals that galvanize the liberal base in favor of courting centrists with establishment bromides. The analyst Lincoln Mitchell, writing for CNN, recently observed, “If Biden wins, organizations like the Lincoln Project will have newfound influence and options.” He continued, “They will be well positioned to be a conservative counter to the progressives who would like to see a President Biden tack left once elected.”

The Lincoln Project’s first ad, “MAGA Church,” set a tone of sophisticated damnation. Scored with gospel music, the spot, which debuted on January 9th, illuminated the hypocrisy of Trump’s appeals to evangelicals, skewering him with his own words. (From a campaign rally: “If you don’t support me, you’re gonna be *so* goddam poor.”)

At the time, COVID-19 had not been detected in the U.S., the economy was strong, and George Floyd was alive. By late April, the country was in crisis. The Project had aired nearly two dozen spots, most of them about the pandemic and some about Trump’s impeachment trial and Ivanka Trump’s business dealings in China.

In 1984, Ronald Reagan framed his reelection campaign with the ad “Morning in America.” The economy had recovered from a severe recession, and the spot offered dreamy imagery of prospering families. In early May, the Lincoln Project released a dystopian homage: “Mourning in America.” A sonorous male voice-over recalled the narrator of the Reagan video, but the ad showed a grayscale of dilapidated houses, coronavirus patients, and unemployment lines. An American flag flew upside down. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the author of “Packaging the Presidency” and the director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, at the University of Pennsylvania, told me that, if the point of the ad was to “remind older voters of the difference between what a Republican *used* to be and what *this* Republican is, you couldn’t do it more effectively than that.”

Hours after the ad appeared, Trump unleashed a string of late-night tweets, calling the Project's founders RINOS—Republicans in Name Only—who “don't know how to win.” “Mourning” went viral, and the Project quickly received more than a million dollars in donations. Schmidt later told me, “We've told the truth on the guy effectively, in a way that hurts. It's fair to say that we're the first group that cut him, in a fight, in a long, long time.”

The founders are devoted readers who send one another books. General Stanley McChrystal's “Team of Teams” has served as a guide on decision-making. They admire Nigel Hamilton's trilogy on Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Robert A. Caro's masterworks on Lyndon Johnson. They have studied a combat technique, developed after the Korean War, called the OODA loop—Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act—in which a fighter outmaneuvers an opponent by processing and acting on information quickly, rather than waiting to develop a definitive assessment. Such a rapid offense is meant to disorient and overwhelm a target. The Project's strategists metabolize news quickly enough to create spots within hours, or even minutes, of an event. In June, after Trump timidly descended a ramp at West Point, and struggled to lift a drinking glass to his mouth, the Project combined footage of the appearance with other videos of him looking feeble, and released “#TrumpIsNotWell.” The viral spot subjected the President to one of his own tricks: he mocked Hillary Clinton when she stumbled in 2016, and constantly suggests that Biden is senile. Trump was soon wasting time at a campaign rally defending his ability to walk and to drink water.

After the President failed to act on intelligence that Russia paid Taliban affiliates to kill American soldiers, the Project released two videos featuring Dan Barkhuff, a former Navy SEAL who is now an emergency physician. In “Betrayed,” Barkhuff declared, “Any Commander-in-Chief with a spine would be stomping the living shit out of some Russians right now.” He continued, “I'm a pro-life, gun-owning combat veteran, and I can see Trump for what he is—a coward.” This type of ad may disquiet progressive Democrats, but they are not the Project's intended audience. The founders are trying to reach Republicans in a language that they share.

Wilson believes that once you start hitting an opponent you should “*never* let up.” Since January, the Project has released well over a hundred ads, which on YouTube alone have attracted some hundred and forty million views. Jamieson said that, whereas a typical campaign may yield one or two memorable spots, the Lincoln Project “routinely” produces noteworthy work. She told me, “They're basically mining everything you can reasonably mine from the available news cycle and the anxieties of the moment. We've never seen that before.”

By summer, the Lincoln Project was rapidly expanding its staff, and its new hires included young Democrats with digital skills and campaign experience. The telltale stickers on one laptop: “California for Warren,” “Justice for Breonna Taylor,” “Save the Bees.”

The Project was on track to take in some seventy million dollars by Election Day—not as much as many established PACs, but far more than the founders anticipated. What they did anticipate was vitriol, from both the left and the right. On Fox News, Laura Ingraham referred to the founders as disgruntled “Bush toadies,” as “cretins,” and as “swamp creatures”—within a single segment. When the Project tweeted a sombre lament about the death of John Lewis, the civil-rights leader and congressman, the liberal columnist Charles Pierce responded, “Everything you did in your previous lives to help put right wing judges into the federal court, up to and including John Roberts, is in need of atonement.” Samuel Moyn, a Yale professor of law and of history, recently wrote that it was “laughable” for the “crew that promoted Newt Gingrich and Sarah Palin as standard-bearers of American conservatism” to suggest that it had “always demanded exemplary leaders.” Moyn made his point in a review of “Never Trump,” by

Robert Saldin and Steven Teles, who suggest that mainstream Democrats have “rehabilitated” the “moral status” of certain Republicans merely because they oppose the President.

In “It Was All a Lie,” Stevens agrees that Republicans should not be forgiven for what they have “encouraged, blessed, and promoted.” He says, “Even if Donald Trump loses in 2020, the Republican Party has legitimized bigotry and hate as an organizing principle.” He also confesses the strangeness of realizing that “what you have spent a good portion of your life working for and toward was not only meritless but also destructive.” Horn told me, “Put me on the same list as Stuart.” She explained, “The party system in general, and the degree to which it has corrupted the ability for anyone to provide good governance, is a serious problem.”

Sarah Lenti, a policy specialist and a Russia expert who worked for Condoleezza Rice during the Bush Administration, is the Project’s executive director. Yet the group’s top leadership is predominantly male, and white, even though women—particularly Republican suburban women—are considered an essential demographic for a Biden victory. All the Project’s military ads are narrated by men; women tend to narrate spots about palace intrigue and the pandemic. The choice is strategic. One of Horn’s responsibilities has been to build a Lincoln Women coalition, and she has noticed that conversations among its members inevitably turn to Trump’s “gross mismanagement” of the coronavirus. She believes that COVID-19 “will be the single most powerful influence on the election.” On October 2nd, after Trump tweeted that he had tested positive for the coronavirus, the Project publicly wished the President a “swift recovery” yet condemned his “dangerously irresponsible messages” about the seriousness of COVID-19. The founders then pushed out a bleak new ad, set in a hospital, that ended with the message “VOTE HIM OUT.”

The Project has also worked to forge another crucial partnership, with Latino voters. At a recent war-room session, Wilson said, “This is where Democrats blow it with Puerto Ricans. They think, Oh, well, they’re largely anti-Trump, so they must be super, super, super-woke liberal—and they’re *not*.” Madrid was commissioning bilingual videos featuring Puerto Rican military veterans. On September 30th, he hosted a Lincoln Project town hall for Latino voters, where the actor John Leguizamo urged attendees to take their “power back” and not let others “demonize us.”

As the Presidential campaign entered its final weeks, the Lincoln Project strategists were increasingly pushing ads into swing states and hosting Zoom town halls. The Project’s political unit analyzes the viewing habits of social-media users to determine who’s watching the ads, and for how long. “That’s how we decide who to target,” Ryan Wiggins, the senior adviser for communications, told me.

Wiggins, a forty-year-old protégée of Wilson’s who had spent her career in G.O.P. politics in Florida, had temporarily left her husband and two children to work in the war room. She and the Project’s other data analysts were seeing that Marion County, in north-central Florida, was an example of a “target-rich environment” where Republican voters might be persuaded—this time—to vote Democrat. The county is deeply red, but viewers there were watching Lincoln Project ads all the way through. Galen told me, “We go after segments of *segments* of states.” The founders had discussed the influx of Puerto Ricans to the I-4 corridor, in central Florida, after Hurricane Maria, and decided that messaging to these voters should emphasize the fact that they’d relocated “because the federal government refused to respond adequately to a massive hurricane in a U.S. territory.”

Ideas for the Project’s major ads tend to come from the founders, who categorize their creative efforts by intention. “There’s our marquee ad of the week—the tentpole ad that we’re going to try to push up toward ten million views,” Schmidt said during one brainstorming session, in late July. The purpose of a “magisterial positive spot” was to remind Republicans that politics didn’t have

to be shameful. Some ads pivoted on the news or were “the equivalent of us trying to force a turnover”; others made tactical strikes against such Presidential allies as Senator Martha McSally, of Arizona. (“You’ll be remembered as just another Trump hack—if you’re remembered at all.”) The “audience of one” ads that aimed to destabilize Trump were akin to a military “PsyOp.”

Economic inequality, climate change, and universal health care were not overtly addressed. The typical themes of attack were COVID-19, the shattered economy, Trump’s weakness on national security, and, as Schmidt put it, the President’s “total disgracefulness.” Schmidt later said, “As you look at the news cycle, whatever the story may be, it passes through some combination of anger or ineptitude or racial animus.”

Trump had recently dispatched an unidentified band of federal officers to quell protests in Portland. Schmidt, at one planning meeting, called the development “sinister and an important thing for us to talk about,” and noted that Trump’s message to white voters was “Hordes of minorities are gonna come and burn down your suburbs.” The ad that the Project eventually released about Portland skirted the racial dynamics and focussed on personal freedom—on the “thugs” and “faceless enforcers” who “say you don’t have a right to protest.”

When the discussion landed on the pandemic and the difficulty of reopening schools, Schmidt said, “What we need to do is talk about *loss*, right?”

Trump, confronted with the enormous national death toll, had recently said, “It is what it is.” The founders compared this remark to “colossal fuckup” messages by previous Presidents, including “Mission accomplished”—Bush’s premature claim of victory during the Iraq War.

Wilson, referring to “It is what it is,” said, “Guys, we can *localize* that spot . . . ‘What it *is*, here in Wisconsin: thirteen-per-cent unemployment.’ ‘What it *is*, here in Florida: record COVID cases, and tourism down *x* kajillion per cent.’ ”

Schmidt reminded them, “We gotta sell *hope* in this space.” This work would be important, he added, because “it will signal to other groups that this is how we ought to do this.”

By law, super PACs cannot coordinate with a Presidential campaign, but there’s nothing stopping a campaign from borrowing rhetoric. The other day, the Biden campaign tweeted a ten-second video of Trump promising supporters that, if he loses, “I will never speak to you again,” and appended a snarky caption: “I’m Joe Biden and I approve this message.”

In May, the Project added a new communications staffer, Keith Edwards, a thirty-five-year-old liberal who was breaking up with his boyfriend and ready for change. Edwards had moved to New York in 2005, from Detroit, after having worked in a beauty salon. In Manhattan, he no longer wanted “to do anything related to hair,” and wound up with a production job on reality shows—“The Real Housewives of Miami,” “Wicked Single.” He wasn’t a consistent voter. But after Trump was elected Edwards joined the communications staff of Corey Johnson, the Democratic speaker of the New York City Council, and, later, the Presidential campaign of Michael Bloomberg.

Edwards’s Twitter habits aligned with the OODA-loop strategy: he is always online, a habit he describes as a form of addiction. (He is eleven years sober.) He shortened and sharpened the Project’s tweets: “Something’s not white about this”; “How much is that in rubles?” He also upped the pace: in February, the Project tweeted only forty-seven times; in June, when Edwards took over the feed, the number jumped to eight hundred and fourteen. When followers asked who was behind the edgy tweets, Edwards often

tweeted back “Abe.” The Project’s audience subsequently exploded, in large part because the founders amplified the official tweets: collectively, they and their top advisers have more than four million followers.

Edwards and two colleagues make up a “rapid-response” team, which monitors the Internet for exploitable material: when a tape of Trump’s sister describing him as dishonest was leaked, Edwards tweeted, “Joe Biden’s sister cherishes him.” In July, after Trump bragged, in a televised interview, about having passed a mental-acuity test by successfully repeating “person, woman, man, camera, TV,” Wilson hired Shawn Patterson, a composer who, in 2015, was nominated for an Oscar for “Everything Is Awesome,” from “The Lego Movie,” to work on a Twitter video. Using heavy synth beats, Patterson remixed the audio of the Trump interview overnight. Edwards captioned the clip with nothing but emojis. The spot has been retweeted, quoted, and liked nearly sixty thousand times.

Late one afternoon in September, members of the rapid-response team were holed up in a condo near the war room, staring at their screens. Edwards, stretched out on a sofa with his terrier mix, Zuki, was tapping on his laptop. Kate Salkowitz, a twenty-two-year-old video editor from Westchester County, was working at the dining-room table, using editing software to excise snippets of Trump’s latest campaign rally. She color-coded his speaking parts—in bright orange—then tested various background music, muttering, “too circusy,” and then “too sinister.”

Salkowitz began college in 2016, at the University of Texas at Austin, majoring in radio, television, and film. When she voted for Hillary Clinton—her first Presidential election—she was writing jokes for a campus knockoff of “S.N.L.” On Election Day, she ended up hosting the live returns. The Presidential results so alarmed Salkowitz that she decided to minor in government.

When Salkowitz graduated, in May, her dad, an audio engineer, urged her to apply to the Lincoln Project—he was a fan. She sent in a video sample and landed an internship. Edwards later challenged her to quickly make a spot about a campaign speech that Trump had just delivered. Salkowitz highlighted the President’s most buffoonish lines (“I’m sort of making it up as I go along”) and layered in pop-up text (the definition of “xenophobia”) with buoyant sound effects. She pulled music from an audio stockpile containing such files as “sitcom laugh track” and “harp.” The video, “[Trump’s Minnesota Speech in 90 Seconds](#),” has been viewed more than two million times, and helped secure Salkowitz a staff position. With Edwards, she has created some of the Lincoln Project’s most popular Twitter videos, including a satirical clip of [Kimberly Guilfoyle](#)’s apocalyptic speech at the Republican National Convention. When Salkowitz informed friends that she was decamping to the war room, they said, “You’re really about to go hang out with all these Republicans?” She told them, “I *like* these people. They’re really smart. What have *you* done for your country today?”

One of Salkowitz’s new roommates, Wiggins, was sitting next to her, building a media database. Wiggins, a United Methodist, believes that “we are called to love everyone” and that supporting Trump perpetuates hate. She told me that after she became alienated by the Republican Party she found a new ideological home in the Lincoln Project, and now thought of herself as a “Lincoln voter.” In town halls, the founders were coaching Republican supporters on how to persuade fellow-conservatives to vote for Biden. In 2017, Schmidt, appearing on a panel at the University of Southern California, noted that Reagan, when running against Jimmy Carter, in 1980, “didn’t *attack* the Carter voter”; he “created a permissive environment” where Democrats could “cross back over.”

As the Project has grown, the founders have reassessed how the organization presents itself to its politically diverse audience. Wilson champions the image of a pirate ship, but another founder opposes the metaphor: pirates pillage. In August, Edwards

tweeted, “We go low so you don’t have to”; the tweet drew more than ten thousand likes, but some Project leaders felt that it clashed with the idea of amassing a “coalition of the decent,” and the tweet was deleted. Around that time, an NBC News reporter tweeted examples of the Project copying other people’s tweets and presenting them as original. (Proper crediting is a big debate in meme culture.) The Web site *TheWrap* asked, “Is this something Honest Abe would do?” The Project publicly vowed to do better.

During the Republican National Convention, the media circulated footage of Trump talking to delegates in North Carolina. The President had just mentioned Obama when a man in the crowd yelled something hard to decipher. Several media outlets quickly characterized the outburst as a racial slur. Edwards tweeted, “When President Trump mentioned Obama, someone from the crowd shouted, ‘Monkey!’ and the president relished in it. Disgusting.”

Others insisted that the man had shouted “Spygate.” (Trump often claims, dubiously, that the Obama Administration used the F.B.I. to spy on his 2016 campaign.) Edwards and I happened to be talking on the phone as Twitter users argued about what the man had said. I watched the clip and heard “Spygate.” Edwards agonized for a moment, then removed the tweet. When a *Washington Post* reporter flagged the deletion, a Biden supporter tweeted that it was “the right thing to do”; another user replied, “The right thing to do is make sure it’s true first.”

On Twitter, the battle instinct has occasionally overtaken judgment and expertise, but the Project’s founders pride themselves on fighting Trump with the truth: every ad is fact-checked, and vetted by a lawyer. At the same time, Wilson has said that all campaigns need communications teams that are “aggressive as hell and don’t need much sleep.” He wrote, “It’s better for them to move fast, break shit, and cause trouble than it is to be too cautious.”

The Lincoln Project now has 2.3 million Twitter followers—a number approaching that of the Republican Party’s official account—and is expected to have a million e-mail subscribers by Election Day. With each high-profile assault from the right, the founders disseminate a fresh fund-raising plea. The solicitations often mention targets by name: when the group was raising money for “Parasite,” Schmidt wrote the e-mail, saying that Graham, whom he once loved “like a brother,” was no longer a “man of courage and conviction.”

The founders also host private fund-raisers on Zoom. In mid-July, about a hundred and fifty prospective donors at a bipartisan event watched Galen, Schmidt, and Wilson describe the Project’s work. One of the hosts, George Vradenburg, a longtime Republican and a former media executive at Fox Broadcasting Company and at AOL Time Warner, said that after he saw the Project’s first ad he “immediately jumped on my checkbook.” The other host, Melissa Moss, the former finance director for the Democratic Party, later told me that the Lincoln Project has “made Democrats better this cycle,” adding, “They’ve upped the game for everybody.”

From December to the end of June, the Project received about twenty million dollars. (Third-quarter data isn’t yet available.) Hollywood names show up on the donor roll—Rob Reiner, Goldie Hawn—as does the occasional former politician, such as Senator Bob Kerrey. The group sometimes takes in large donations: Stephen Mandel, the founder of a Connecticut hedge fund, gave a million dollars; Joshua Bekenstein, the co-chair of Bain Capital, the Massachusetts investment firm co-founded by Romney, donated a hundred thousand; the Walmart heir Christy Walton has given thirty thousand. But, notably, more than forty per cent of the donations are of two hundred and fifty dollars or less.

It is hard to know precisely how the money is being spent, because super PACs can legally withhold some details of transactions with subcontractors. The Project has been criticized for channelling most of the group's spending through two of the founders' consulting firms. Galen, who owns one of the firms, told me that some of the Project's collaborators are Republicans who don't want to be publicly identified.

Mother Jones recently documented the rise of “resistance grift”: profiteering from the public's despair over Trump. A “scam PAC” presents itself as a political-action committee but shows little evidence of activity. The Project does not meet this definition: it produces a weekly barrage of ads, Twitter shorts, op-eds, Zoom town halls, Facebook groups, data analysis, coalition work, and Instagram posts, in addition to a podcast and an online program, “LPTV,” that features unbridled political analysis. (During the Republican convention, Wilson chortled that Melania Trump's speech was “focus-grouped until it fell over dead.”)

The Washington *Post* columnist Max Boot recently wrote that, if the founders are being well compensated, “they deserve it”; they have “shown greater fealty to conservative principles than 99 percent of elected Republicans.” Some liberals, however, fear that Democrats who give to the Lincoln Project are naïvely funding savvy operatives who could end up splitting their party into progressive and centrist factions. *National Review*, meanwhile, has accused the Project of adopting liberal talking points in order to “open up anti-Trump wallets on the left.”

Late last year, Paul Spector, a liberal organizational consultant in Massachusetts, read the founders' *Times* Op-Ed and was surprised to discover that their principles seemed to mirror his own. He later said, “Mitt Romney was my governor. I didn't like him, but he and I basically agree on what democracy *stands* for. The same is true of the folks at the Lincoln Project.”

When Spector arranged a Zoom fund-raiser for the group, in August, some Democrats he approached initially refused to participate. Spector recalled, “My reaction was ‘I'm glad you weren't President in World War Two, because without the Soviet Union we wouldn't have won.’” Schmidt appeared at Spector's event and told the prospective donors, “What I'm looking for in this election is a repudiation—a *humiliation*—of Trump and Trumpism.” The fund-raiser brought in some forty thousand dollars, enough to finance the production of a handful of new spots or to buy a few days' worth of ads on Fox News in Washington, D.C. Spector told me, “People complain that these guys aren't spending enough on the ads, and that it's a bunch of big-shot rich people. I say these big-shot rich people know how to get these ads seen by millions of people.”

After Abraham Lincoln's appearance at Cooper Union, one of his New York hosts sent him a note lauding the speech as “so weaved & linked with truth, that it *convinced men*.” Will the Lincoln Project change votes? The question won't be answerable until after the election, but the founders sometimes hashtag their efforts #LincolnProjectEffect. They suspect that an ad describing Brad Parscale, the President's campaign manager, as “the man Trump can't win without” pierced the President's ego so deeply that it led to Parscale's demotion. They believe that, with “Flag of Treason,” an ad connecting the Confederate flag to Trump and his supporters, they influenced Mississippi lawmakers' decision to change their state banner. (College athletes, including football players at Mississippi State and the University of Mississippi, had also pushed for change.) On September 16th, the Project tweeted, “You gave us \$1MIL to go after @LindseyGrahamSC. So, we created one of our hardest hitting ads to date and we blanketed South Carolina with it. Now Harrison”—Jaime Harrison, Graham's challenger—“is tied with Graham.”

Spector, the Massachusetts donor, knows that some pollsters believe the ads “won't change anybody's mind.” But he said that, in a time of vicious partisanship, the Lincoln Project offered him a glimmer of the old consensus, however romantic, that America's leaders should embody character and reason. The Project, he said, “expanded the universe of who's fighting for our country.”

Kate Kenski, who teaches political communication at the University of Arizona, said, “What makes the Lincoln Project interesting, and important, is something that perhaps *everyone* should do within the groups in which they reside—question leadership.”

On the morning of September 10th, Wilson, Schmidt, Galen, and several others gathered on a sunlit patio, near a blazing fire pit. The group's dynamics were evolving. Conway wasn't the only core member to have left: Weaver had suffered a heart attack over the summer and was recuperating. The former R.N.C. chairman Michael Steele had joined. The first Presidential debate was scheduled for September 29th. Galen said, of Trump, “What's the story that we want everybody to be talking about, or to know, before he hits that stage in Cleveland?” (After Trump's tyrannical performance, Schmidt, on the “LPTV” show, said, “We're gonna put this insanity in the grave.”)

Biden was leading in the polls, but Project members weren't feeling complacent. Galen had received an e-mail from “a friend of ours in Minnesota” who was “a little worried.” Madrid said, “It's worrying time—everyone's getting a little worried *everywhere*.”

The period between Labor Day and mid-October would be the “sweet spot” for ads, as voters mailed in absentee ballots. “Parasite,” the Graham ad, was popular on social media, but “Morning Joe” had declined to feature it, and South Carolina news stations were asking the Project to “tone it down.” Galen reported that images of rotting flesh apparently “did not go well with people's bagels.”

The Project's ads continued to filter through the public consciousness: the hosts of a Ringer podcast had recently interrupted their discussion of athletes to describe the average Lincoln Project spot as a “John Oliver sketch in political-action-committee form.”

The founders moved on to a spot that they were preparing for the nineteenth anniversary of 9/11. The documentary-film crew navigated the patio with cameras and boom mikes. At one point, a director asked if the team was disappointed that George W. Bush hadn't joined the Project. Schmidt said that it wouldn't be appropriate: “He's an ex-President.” Would there be an October surprise? The founders laughed. Stuart Stevens said, “Trump would invade *Canada* if he thought he could win.”

The founders had wondered whether they should compare the 9/11 death toll to COVID-19 casualties, or instead create something “uplifting and patriotic,” honoring first responders. Stevens stepped away to work on a script, then came back to the patio and read a draft aloud: “'9/11, 2001. A day of national tragedy and heroism. Americans coming together. But not for Donald Trump.'” The ad would feature excerpts of an interview in which Trump bragged that the terrorist attack had left him owning the tallest building in Manhattan. (Trump's claim wasn't true.)

Schmidt, who wanted the new ads to convey an unambiguous “call to action,” suggested a jab: “‘Then, he was just a terrible person. Today, he's the worst President in American history—and the greatest divider. Vote him out.’”

The following week, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died. Republican leaders immediately began maneuvering to replace her, even though some of them vowed not to fill any vacancy on the Court during an election year. That night, I had dinner with Schmidt, Wilson, and Wiggins, who were concerned that heightened discussion over the policy ramifications—guns, abortion, health care—would interfere with their goal of keeping voters focussed on Trump's failings. “It'll be a red-meat *circus*,” Wiggins said.

At the Cooper Union event, Wilson had told the audience that the 2020 election is a test of “whether we're gonna be a nation of idolaters, or of ideas.” The Lincoln Project was less “Never Trump” than “always *America*”—the strategists felt that they were

helping to frame the election as an existential choice.

The morning after Ginsburg died, they held an emergency meeting, then released a statement: “In a Presidency marked by corruption, malfeasance, incompetence, and a profound disrespect for the American system of government and our Constitution, any nominee put forth by Donald Trump, regardless of their resume or background, would forever bear the stain of a majoritarian, hyper-partisan choice made by a president and Republican Senate majority desperate to cling to power.” The Project released a Twitter short, showing news footage of G.O.P. senators making such empty declarations as “The people deserve to be heard!”

Then the founders pivoted back to flaying Trump. A fresh Twitter strike on the President’s troubling relationship with Russia was set to Britney Spears’s “Oops! . . . I Did It Again.” The caption: “He’s not that innocent.” ♦

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