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Inside Trump's Stunning Upset Victory

'Jesus, can we come back from this?' the nominee asked as his numbers tanked. Because of Clinton, he did.

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It was Friday afternoon, an hour after America heard Donald Trump bragging on tape about sexually assaulting women, when Roger Stone's phone rang.

A secretary in Trump's office had an urgent request: The GOP nominee wanted the political dark-arts operative to resend a confidential memo he had penned less than two weeks earlier. It was a one-page guide on Stone's favorite line of attack against the Democratic nominee—how to savage Hillary Clinton for Bill Clinton's history with other women. It was an issue, Stone wrote, that is "NOT about marital infidelity, adultery or 'indiscretions.'"

It was also, however, a political third rail for most conventional candidates—a tactic that Republicans had tested and deemed a failure, and an approach so ugly that even the Clintons' most vocal detractors urged Trump against.

But the GOP nominee, recognizing his crude, abusive comments caught on an Access Hollywood tape as a potential campaign-ender, needed no convincing; he was insulted by the uproar, shocked at the double-standard he felt he was facing compared with Bill Clinton, and decided it was time to return fire.

“Hillary has bullied, attacked, shamed and intimidated his victims,” Trump said in an apology just after midnight, quoting the Stone memo almost verbatim. And two days later, 90 minutes before the debate, he followed Stone's advice and brought Bill Clinton's accusers to a surprise press conference and then to the debate to confront the former president in person.

Trump's untraditional and unflinchingly shameless campaign was always an improvised, TV drama. It was personality-driven, consumed with defending the candidate's manhood and gratifying his ego, uninterested in the serious but less glamorous work of building a professional campaign infrastructure, undeterred by the candidate's troublesome past and unwilling to adopt a message the GOP establishment swore he needed to manufacture the win.

And yet, he won.

But not because this celebrity businessman and his team managed to eke some functionality out of the chaos. Indeed it looked like a train wreck because it was.

No, Donald Trump is now president-elect because his relentless, sometimes manic salesman's pitch was able to pluck a string with Americans that no poll really managed to capture: The perpetual belief that a new character with a new story could deliver them something nobody else could, whether a trade victory over China, or a wall against Mexicans, or a return to a vision of America that seemed to be vanishing for good. And the more he cut loose, the more the media covered him, and the more people he reached.

To be sure, many Republicans held their noses, and Hillary Clinton made it much easier to hold them and vote for Trump. She just couldn't stay ahead of the taint of her long association with Washington power, and the whiff of scandal that has long trailed her. Clinton's inability to outrun the controversy of her emails—the private email server she used to avoid State Department record-keeping, the 30,000 she deleted before handing over thousands of others to the government, the 50,000 stolen from her campaign

chairman and leaked daily by WikiLeaks for a month leading to the election, and the thousands more unearthed by the FBI with less than two weeks to go in the 2016 contest.

No, Donald Trump is now president-elect because Hillary Clinton failed—an opinion not just being spouted by Democrats and left-leaning pundits unwilling to believe America would elect a man who insulted nearly every demographic group in the country en route to Election Day. It's an opinion that Republicans, eyes now wide with shock, say is true.

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So in the end, it didn't matter that Trump surrounded himself with a coterie of enablers, creating a bubble and a campaign defined by chaos—one populated by a campaign manager with no high-level presidential campaign experience, a top staffer who left the campaign unnoticed for two weeks, and an inexperienced candidate who panicked when he saw his poll numbers crater.

On Election Day, voters judged the sins of both candidates equally, and Trump simply edged out the win.

“This was always going to be negative in the final stretch,” said Michael Caputo, a former Trump political adviser, arguing that both sides had waged toxic campaigns. “That always the case, but I can't remember a campaign this negative, this visceral.”

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Inside the Republican Party's headquarters, the calming scents of burning incense have wafted out from the offices of Reince Priebus for much of the last year.

The Republican National Committee chairman had been having a rough election cycle, having watched Trump orchestrate an unexpected and divisive takeover of the party. But at the outset of Trump's general election campaign, one of his biggest complaints—one that he frequently relayed to top aides, fellow party officials and reporters—centered on Trump's combative and fast-talking campaign manager: Corey Lewandowski.

The scrappy 43-year-old political outsider was one of Trump's first campaign hires despite never having worked at a high level on a presidential race. And for months, he had been colliding with Paul Manafort, a wealthy 67-year-old lobbyist and veteran of several presidential campaigns who had been brought in to professionalize the campaign late in the GOP primary.

Shortly after Manafort came aboard that spring, Lewandowski and Manafort met at Mar-a-Lago, Trump's estate in Palm Beach, Fla. It was a meeting that had been awkward, to say the least. In the weeks to come, Manafort had tried in vain to convince Lewandowski that he wasn't a threat. If Trump won the presidency, Manafort told his younger colleague, he had no interest in a Washington job.

Their feud created a poisonous environment where little got done and campaign employees felt pressure to choose sides. Priebus wasn't the only one frustrated. Inside Trump Tower, Trump's children and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, were losing patience with Lewandowski, who seemed to be devoting the bulk of his time to undermining Manafort.

The campaign manager assisted reporters working on tough stories about his rival, even providing Manafort's cell phone number when they had been unable to reach him, and had moved the desk of one Manafort ally from an office into a hallway.

But by the spring, Lewandowski's time was running out—and he knew it. Perhaps sensing Trump's children closing in on him, Lewandowski began working with a West Coast-based agent to try to line up a book deal to cash in on his newfound fame.

On the evening of June 19, the children had dinner with their father and told him in no uncertain terms it was time to let Lewandowski go. The next morning, he was fired—and Manafort was put in charge. Within the week, Lewandowski had inked a six-figure contract as an on-air contributor at CNN.

A little more than a month after Trump had become the presumptive GOP nominee, the Trump kids were trying mightily to right a ship that was already badly off course. But they were in a race against time. Manafort had a month until the convention—and he was about to tackle perhaps the most pressing issue of all: How to turn Trump's disorganized, ragtag campaign into something that could take on the Clinton machine.

Manafort started with baby steps, getting Trump to use a teleprompter—something he had so far refused to do at his rallies, which often resulted in him careening off message—and having him deliver policy speeches.

But Trump resisted.

When the candidate won a resounding victory in an April primary in his home state of New York, Manafort handed Trump a speech he'd written that aimed to strike a more presidential tone. Trump took a quick look at the remarks and told Manafort he'd consider delivering something like them in the future, but would prefer to wing his speech that night.

At an RNC meeting in Hollywood, Fla., Manafort had tried to reassure party officials, telling them that Trump was putting on an act and could be changed. When his remarks leaked, Trump went ballistic. Once Manafort returned, he demanded to know why his aide seemed to be undermining him.

Not the case at all, Manafort tried to tell him. He was a fan of Trump's grassroots-driven rallies. It's just that the campaign would be evolving. While Trump may have been willing to change, it had become apparent that the image-conscious candidate was deeply sensitive to the perception that others were trying to alter his candidacy.

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At times, though, it was hard to get Trump, a political neophyte at heart, to understand what it would take to win a general election. Rick Reed, who had helped to oversee the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth assault on John Kerry in 2004 and had signed on to craft Trump's TV ads, produced a hard-hitting, 60-second commercial, titled "4 am," that hammered Clinton over her handling of the deadly 2012 terrorist attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya. Trump's aides thought the ad was brutal and could do lasting damage to the Democrat.

But Trump, going on gut, thought he knew better. The candidate who often complained about the "scam" of paid TV advertising, hated the commercial—and let his team know it. He knew TV, he told them, and it would never work. (In fact, according to an internal Trump polling memo, in August, when the campaign dial-tested the spot in three swing states, along with 22 other prospective spots, it did the most to move voters to Trump's side.)

Reed was stunned. "Can you believe this bullshit?" he asked one friend.

Then there was Trump's decision to attack a judge of Mexican heritage. Manafort, who pleaded with the candidate to stop the barrage, thought the decision was catastrophic, one that would set the Republican candidate back with Hispanic and swing voters. Trump, however, couldn't see the problem – and for days resisted efforts to stop his assault.

It was now early June and the Republican National Convention—Trump's crowning—was right around the corner. It was a moment for the campaign to turn the corner, to focus on healing the wounds opened in the bitter Republican primary and moving together into a general election against a wounded Democratic nominee who was widely considered to be beatable.

And Trump was promising to do all that at his convention, while also putting on a show the likes of which had not been seen before in presidential politics. His grandest plans, however, were about to run smack into a wall.

By mid-June, less than one month before the convention would be gaveled in, there was no program. No celebrity acts had been booked. No known GOP leaders or elders had asked for a speaking slot. Organizers were concerned enough that they decided to bring in Bill Greener, a veteran Republican convention planner who had worked with Manafort on the 1996 campaign.

The planning, like much else, had been scattershot. Trump also had aides look into whether he could give an outdoor nomination acceptance speech, as Barack Obama did in 2008, at Progressive Field, home of the Cleveland Indians. But the security costs would run into the millions and the convention was already behind budget. Trump had wanted controversial boxing promoter Don King to have a speaking role, something his advisers eventually dissuaded him from. Stone had requested that Katherine Willey, a Bill Clinton accuser, take the stage. But those plans, too, were yanked.

At one point, Trump, in keeping with his outsider style, considered not having any elected officials give speeches. The idea was scrapped because it was considered impractical. Slots were ultimately filled with mostly B- and C-list celebrities and GOP officials.

Those troubles, however, ranked below the drama unfolding around a speaking slot traditionally reserved for the final vanquished contender.

On July 6, two weeks before the convention, Priebus met with Ted Cruz and the Texas senator's top political adviser, Jeff Roe, at Charlie Palmer's steakhouse on Constitution Avenue, just steps from the Senate. The group sat in a back corner against a wall. The chairman, eager for a show of unity in Cleveland, wanted Cruz, who had clashed bitterly with Trump, to speak. Priebus felt Cruz out about his feelings on the GOP nominee.

Cruz, who had proven himself over the course of 2016 as an adept tactician, knew he had leverage and agreed to sit with Trump on Capitol Hill the next day.

They met privately at the offices of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, where Trump had just addressed the GOP Senate conference. Trump, who was with his daughter Ivanka, Kushner, and Priebus, spent 45 minutes talking with Cruz. He offered Cruz a speaking slot, which the senator accepted. But Trump, perhaps owing to his lack of political experience, neglected to ask for something even more basic: Cruz's endorsement.

The oversight set the stage for chaos in Cleveland. As the convention neared, the looming disaster never fully dawned on Trump Tower. They had been operating on the assumption that Cruz would offer his support—even though it had never been made explicit.

It wasn't until the first day of the convention that the New Yorker called Cruz and finally asked him for an endorsement.

The Texan said no.

Two days later, at 6:30 p.m., just two hours before Cruz would walk on stage, the senator's team sent Trump's campaign a copy of the speech. Manafort called Roe immediately; Cruz needed to give Trump a bigger presence in his remarks, the nominee's campaign chairman said. And again, the answer from Cruz's camp was no.

Manafort hung up, then called back a few minutes later. He threatened to pull the plug; Cruz might not be allowed to take the stage if he didn't submit.

Roe didn't blink. "Knock yourself out," he said.

Manafort didn't remove Cruz from the schedule. Doing so, he worried, would have turned the senator into a martyr. Instead, the campaign devised a plan for Trump, who was angry about the situation, to enter the arena at the end of Cruz's speech and take a seat in the private box with his family, which would take some attention away from the senator.

At 8:15, Cruz and his team departed their downtown hotel for the Quicken Loans Arena. Cruz, after meeting with Dan Patrick, Trump's Texas chairman, made a few changes to the speech. But he didn't include the endorsement the Trump family wanted. Instead, Ted Cruz urged Republicans to "vote your conscience."

A cascade of boos flooded the convention hall but the damage was already done. Cruz didn't play the role intended; rather than helping to unify the Republican Party and rally the GOP for a fight against Hillary Clinton, the man who proclaimed himself to be guided by conservative principles smirked as he delivered a sucker punch that drove the most dominant storyline coming out of Cleveland—Trump's party still didn't like him.

Things were about to get a whole lot worse.

In the days after the convention, Trump endured a series of disastrous headlines, most of them surrounding his attacks on a Muslim Gold Star family that had shamed him from the Democratic National Committee stage. Priebus met with the nominee and told him he was hurting himself.

Trump, deeply demoralized, was at one of his lowest points in the campaign.

In August, Trump gathered a number of his top advisers in New York City for a presentation led by his chief pollster, Tony Fabrizio. The numbers showed the Republican nominee falling behind in a number of states. Trump was stunned by the numbers, but he didn't push back.

“Jesus,” the Republican nominee told the group. “Can we come back from this?”

Trump would frequently ask his team whether he could win. But the mood was different this time around. His aides were struck by the feeling of helplessness that had overtaken a candidate whose public image was centered on his confidence. To some of them, it highlighted his political inexperience. While Trump was behind by high single digits in some battlegrounds, political history had shown that a comeback at this stage in the game, particularly with Clinton's vulnerabilities, wasn't out of the question. Yet Trump was acting like it was.

Even Trump's children were getting frustrated. During one meeting, Donald Trump Jr. expressed frustration with Steven Mnuchin, the campaign's top fundraiser and a newcomer to politics. “Steve doesn't really know what he's doing,” two people present quoted the younger Trump as saying. “So why is he doing this job?” (Jason Miller, a Trump spokesman, denied that Donald Trump Jr. had expressed that sentiment.)

Republican leaders, meanwhile, were waging a failing campaign to get Trump on track. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Trump spoke multiple times during the general election, with McConnell often urging GOP nominee to tone down his incendiary rhetoric and combative style.

Once, when Trump called McConnell, angry over some Republicans attacking him in public, McConnell jumped in to offer some advice. “You know, Donald, you don't have to respond every time you're criticized.”

Why not? Trump replied.

Because, the famously disciplined McConnell explained, if you do, people will spend the next two weeks talking about you instead of Clinton.

The advice bothered Trump. The senator, Trump believed, was trying to get him to be more “Washington” and, like House Speaker Paul Ryan, wasn't fully on board. Trump and McConnell, the GOP nominee's team came to accept, were deeply dissimilar figures. After they spoke, Manafort would often call McConnell's team back to stress the positive points of the conversation.

Manafort, meanwhile, was having problems of his own. The campaign chairman had suffered weeks of media scrutiny into his ties with Russian-linked oligarchs and it was taking a toll. On Aug. 18, Manafort came to Trump's Alexandria, Va. offices for a busy day of meetings to discuss polling, the campaign's budget, and the GOP path to victory.

Manafort, who was routinely getting three hours of sleep a night, was exhausted and frustrated. At one point, a person present said, he appeared to doze off.

Later in the day, Manafort invited a few aides into a private office. The coverage, which he felt to be deeply unfair, was never going to stop. "They're just going to keep beating the shit out of me until I can't take it anymore," he said.

He had also been losing the confidence of Trump's family, especially Kushner, who by now was gaining influence in the campaign. "Paul's losing his edge," Kushner told a fellow aide one day. Trump, a consummate viewer of cable news, had taken to complaining about how Manafort performed on TV appearances.

On Aug. 19, the day after the Alexandria meetings, Manafort abruptly announced his resignation.

And that's when the campaign started to turn around for Trump.

Taking Manafort's place were two people who would—as Lewandowski once famously said — let Trump be Trump. Bannon took over as campaign CEO and the campaign manager would be Kellyanne Conway, a pollster who'd been brought on in June and who developed a chemistry with Trump that Manafort had not, mainly by cloaking the difficult realities she delivered to the candidate in more optimistic terms.

Trump's decision to elevate the two, especially Bannon, demonstrated that Trump wanted to end his campaign just as he'd begun it: as an unapologetic, bare-knuckled nationalist. Recommended to Trump at the urging of GOP mega-donor Robert Mercer, Bannon oversaw the alt-right Breitbart website, which frequently takes on Republican establishment figures.

Stone was also in Trump's ear. The strategist, who had known the billionaire for decades, enjoyed a special kind of relationship with the nominee—one that Trump's handlers grudgingly came to accept.

Conway and Bannon took charge with the critical debate season just weeks away. While Clinton had been taking debate prep seriously, the far less disciplined Trump was doing little. His prep sessions, which included former Fox News Chairman Roger Ailes, were unfocused affairs. Among those pushing for a more rigorous process was former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a standout debater in the 2012 GOP primary campaign who wrote

a series of internal campaign emails and white papers outlining what had to be done to get Trump prepared – and was convinced that Trump needed the assistance of professionals who could get him ready for such an adversarial setting.

David Bossie, the campaign's newly-installed deputy campaign manager, was particularly frustrated there wasn't a structure and more conventional approach. There are too many people in room, he told people. And there isn't enough focus.

When Trump arrived at Hofstra University on Long Island for the first debate on September 26, he was on edge. When he took the stage, he struggled to summon the same rancor, delivering a scattered, relatively subdued and at times incoherent performance. There was no denying that the debate was a disaster—one that Trump's team was sensitive about. Afterward, the campaign's polling operation was initially planning on asking voters who won the showdown but Conway's deputy, Brett Loyd, told them to leave that question out.

But it didn't matter. The white voters who would drive his Election Night win responded with cheers to his debate performance. They didn't flinch when he interrupted Clinton dozens of times or bristle when he couldn't answer substantive questions.

He was speaking to his audience, and that's all he needed to do.

Yet, even in the final stretch, Trump's team reminded divided about what their message should be. At one point, his pollsters complained to the candidate's top aides on a conference call that Trump was missing a golden opportunity to run as a change agent—something that could help him build momentum.

“On Friday's polling team call to review the state data, I think you heard all of us express frustration with DJT's inability to “own” the “change” message,” the pollsters, Fabrizio, David Lee, and Travis Tunis, wrote in an Oct. 3 memo to senior aides Conway, Bannon, Bossie, and Brad Parscale.

The memo painted a bleak picture for Trump, noting that the campaign's internal surveys showed him behind in swing states like North Carolina and Florida, and also in traditionally conservative Georgia – but argued that presenting Trump as a “change” figure was perhaps the only way to turn the tide. “This is why it is critical to get DJT to understand the importance of this message to his victory,” the pollsters implored.

When the Access Hollywood tape hit, Trump recognized the peril it presented and in that moment decided it was time to call on his longest-serving advisor—Stone.

Trump's campaign set in motion Stone's plan to bring Bill Clinton's accusers to the second debate. Candice Jackson, an attorney representing one of the women and who had worked with Stone for months, was told by Conway to make arrangements to get to St. Louis. But after the tape dropped, and with Stone's memo in hand, Trump directed his team to take their plan to DEFCON 1.

On Oct. 9, Bill Clinton's accusers gathered in a hotel room and were greeted by Conway and Bannon. That, Jackson said, "was when Kellyanne informed us that Trump would come in and then press would come in. So it was about 15 or 20 minutes ahead of the actual press conference that we first learned there would be a press conference."

Here was perhaps the most explosive moment of the 2016 campaign—Trump ignoring all of the advice of veteran Republican leaders and strategists and instead adopting Stone's prescribed course, giving accusers of Bill Clinton, who was not running for president, a national platform to prosecute a case against the woman who was, Hillary Clinton.

It wasn't the only thing kept from the women that night. They learned that Trump's campaign had plotted to have them seated in the family box at the debate, which meant they would be confronting Bill Clinton, in person.

But the shock wore off not long after the debate began—acrimoniously, without a handshake—and when it was over, Clinton, controlled and stone-faced throughout the debate, was once again deemed to have won. And once again, it didn't matter to Trump's voters.

And then, 11 days before the election, Trump got a break he needed—the FBI director's stunning announcement that his bureau was reviewing new information in the Clinton email probe. A renewed sense of optimism rippled through the Trump ranks. Aides began openly discussing which jobs they might get in a Trump administration. And at the RNC, operatives said they detected a dramatic shift toward Trump among undecided and Republican voters who had been wary of the nominee.

As Trump hit the final stretch, and he searched for a narrow path to victory, his team decided on a gambit: to try to steal a blue state from Clinton. On Oct. 24, Fabrizio wrote a

memo to Bossie—under the header “CONFIDENTIAL - EYES ONLY” that outlined a proposed plan for the final two weeks of the election.

“Bottom line, if we do NOT expand our targets to try and steal at least 2 of the current lean Clinton states, we are will be left with trying to draw to an inside straight flush,” he wrote.

Fabrizio argued that Trump would have to expand the map to have a realistic shot at winning, suggesting that the Republican compete in Michigan and Minnesota. Within days, Trump was heading to the Democratic-friendly states.

The odds were long. The RNC's predictive model on the Friday afternoon before the election had Trump losing all-important Florida by 2 percentage points and finishing with 240 electoral votes—30 short of the tally needed to win the presidency.

Clearly, Republicans couldn't see victory on the horizon. But Trump didn't lose heart, as he did in August.

In the final days of the campaign, he nursed grudges and plotted revenge against those he felt had wronged him. At close to the top of the list was Ryan, the House speaker who, Trump was convinced, seemed determined to undermine him at all costs. Bannon, whose Breitbart website reads like an anti-Ryan bulletin board, had already begun prepping for a post-election push to remove the Wisconsin Republican from the speakership. It hasn't escaped Bannon's attention, or Trump's, that the No. 2 House Republican, California Rep. Kevin McCarthy, has been far more supportive of Trump than Ryan.

Trump's circle of advisers remained as elastic, and unwieldy, as ever. Aside from Stone, Bannon, Conway, a figure from the past, Manafort, was back in the fold. The strategist was offering the GOP nominee pointers on how to handle the Clinton email news and urging him to make a play in Michigan. Lewandowski, too, would join Trump on the trail in New Hampshire.

Priebus, meanwhile, had become a trusted member of the inner sanctum, all with the hope of holding his fragile party together and exerting a positive influence on his inexperienced, self-destructive nominee. Through a mix of chiding and cajoling, he'd succeeded in ways Manafort had not.

And yet, Trump had always done it his way - on matters large and small.

On the last Wednesday before Election Day, following a rally in Pensacola Fla., Priebus joined Trump on the self-described billionaire's 757 jet. With Trump settled into his leather

armchair, the cabin television set was tuned to CNN. Priebus suggested they flip over to catch game seven of the World Series between the Chicago Cubs and Cleveland Indians.

But Trump said no.

He controlled the remote and was fixated on the image on the screen: a picture of himself.

He wasn't about to start listening to Republican veterans now.