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How political consulting works—or doesn’t

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By Molly Ball  
Illustrations by Eddie Guy





# THIS

past April, the American Association of Political Consultants gathered for its annual conference, known as the Pollies, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. During breaks between sessions (“Buying Votes in a Presidential Election,” “Staying Out of Jail”), attendees donned swimsuits and mingled in the waves, discussing digital-advertising rates over mango margaritas.

These are boom times for political consultants—by one rough estimate, more than \$6 billion will go to or through consulting firms during this year’s elections—and the scene at the conference was befitting of an industry awash in cash. Booths showcased the wares of campaign-literature printers, data-acquisition specialists, automated-phone-call vendors, online-fund-raising experts, and social-media-analytics firms. Whole companies exist just to manufacture the throwaway trinkets campaigns hand out, from stress balls with a candidate’s name on them to red-white-and-blue fingernail files.

But all was not well at the Pollies. A confab intended to be a sun-soaked junket was instead shadowed by the island’s debt crisis, the Zika virus, and a forecast of stormy weather throughout the week. It was almost too perfect a metaphor: Despite all the money pouring into political consulting, a palpable sense of unease looms over the profession. The consultants may be getting rich, but recent events suggest they don’t have any idea what they’re doing.

Consider a few of this year’s election results. In the most expensive House primary in the country, a wealthy Maryland Democrat hired some of the best pros money could buy and bombarded voters with TV and radio ads, direct mail, and robocalls—only to finish the race \$13 million poorer and seven points shy of victory.

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almost \$6 million to a state-of-the-art analytics firm that touted its slicing and dicing of the electorate based on personality profiles. Marco Rubio’s campaign and super PAC spent \$105 million; Ben Carson’s spent \$78 million. Most notoriously, Jeb Bush, between his campaign and his super PAC, employed a flotilla of the best-credentialed consultants in Republican politics, burned through \$139 million of his donors’ money—and dropped out after just three primaries, having won four delegates and as little as 3 percent of the vote in the states where he competed.

And then there was Donald Trump, whose smash success in the Republican primaries was an emperor-has-no-clothes moment for political consulting if ever there was one. Trump spent the primaries boasting about his lack of a super PAC or traditional fund-raising operation. He didn’t employ a pollster or chief strategist or speechwriter. His campaign infrastructure was nonexistent; he spent only about \$19 million on television ads. His campaign manager was a former cop with no experience in a presidential race, and his press secretary was a 27-year-old fashion publicist. Yet Trump dominated a 17-candidate field that many pundits had considered the deepest bench of Republican talent in decades.

Trump himself seemed to suspect that his win cast some doubt on the value of political consultants. “I’ve gone against some of the most sophisticated staffs ever put together, with unlimited money,” he told me while the primaries were still in progress. “Rand, Jeb, Marco—look at all of them. The highest-level pros. And I’m leading by millions of votes and hundreds of delegates. I think it says something.”

Exactly what Trump’s impending victory said about the campaign business was the subject of much discussion among the flacks, pollsters, ad makers, strategists, and other assorted Svengalis and

## TROUBLE IN PARADISE

Above: The American Association of Political Consultants conference in Puerto Rico, where Donald Trump’s success caused some consternation. Right: Mike Murphy led Jeb Bush’s \$100 million-plus super PAC.

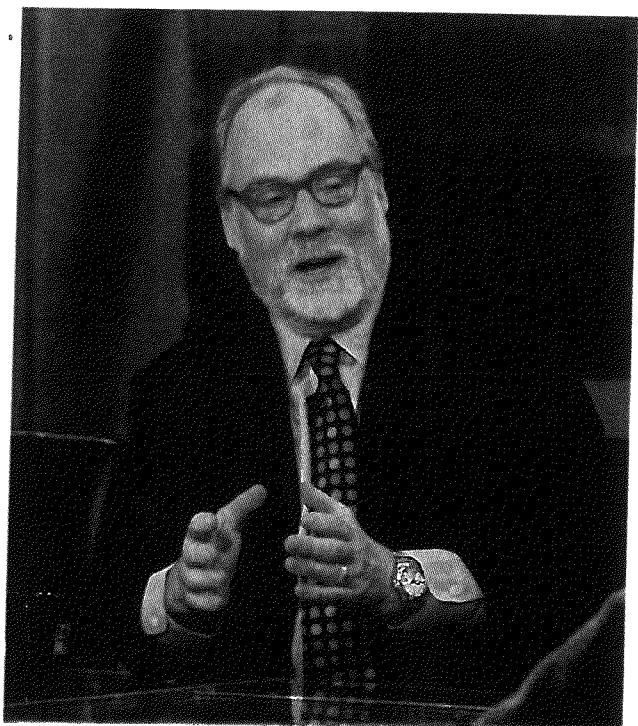
soothsayers who had gathered in San Juan. (Disclosure: I was a speaker at the conference.) Most insisted—perhaps a little too adamantly—that Trump was an anomaly. Some who had worked in developing countries said his presidential bid reminded them of strongman campaigns they’d seen abroad.

Jeb Bush’s super PAC, Right to Rise, came up in many conversations too; it spent \$104 million supporting Bush’s candidacy. Right to Rise’s steward, the celebrity consultant Mike Murphy, has been widely derided for the nine-figure debacle. In San Juan, though, his failure was cast in a more forgiving light: The consultants praised Murphy for a valiant effort in what they saw as an unwinnable fight. “Sure, they raised \$100 million, but there’s only so much you can do,” a campaign-finance attorney named Dan Backer told one conference session. “They were trying to sell New Coke—a product people didn’t want to buy.”

But if the product was doomed from the start, one had to wonder what good anyone thought a \$100 million marketing campaign would do. As the consultants lined up for hand-rolled cigars and traded stories about wrangling ornery clients, they left unspoken the question that hangs over their profession this year: What if their tactics and strategies simply don’t work?

**MIKE** Murphy, the architect of Jeb Bush’s very expensive fiasco, is a merry, acerbic political lifer beloved by the press for the sarcastic one-liners that emanate from his blond-bearded, bespectacled visage. When I met him in Los Angeles in April, he seemed, for a man who had just blown more than \$100 million of other people’s money, remarkably serene.

Murphy echoed the comments I’d heard from his brethren in Puerto Rico. “We always thought we were a long shot,”



he said, sipping a Diet Coke on a couch in the mostly empty lobby of a Hollywood hotel. Far from being the price tag of victory, the \$100 million-plus was a hedge against difficulty, he claimed: “We always thought we needed the money to fight the headwinds we’d have as a non-grievance candidate in a grievance year.”

Bush, he said, was simply the wrong man for the times: “All the spending is an amplifier. If your message doesn’t resonate with enough people, spending on its own doesn’t make a difference. And they didn’t want what we were selling.”

This explanation, of course, conveniently absolves Murphy of responsibility for Bush’s loss. After the campaign ended, he distributed bumper stickers to staff and donors that read DON’T BLAME ME, I WAS FOR JEB! PAID FOR BY MIKE MURPHY. To Bush’s wealthy donors, this attitude was understandably hard to swallow: The campaign had been pitched to them as a sure bet, not a lost cause—and many of them *did* blame Murphy.

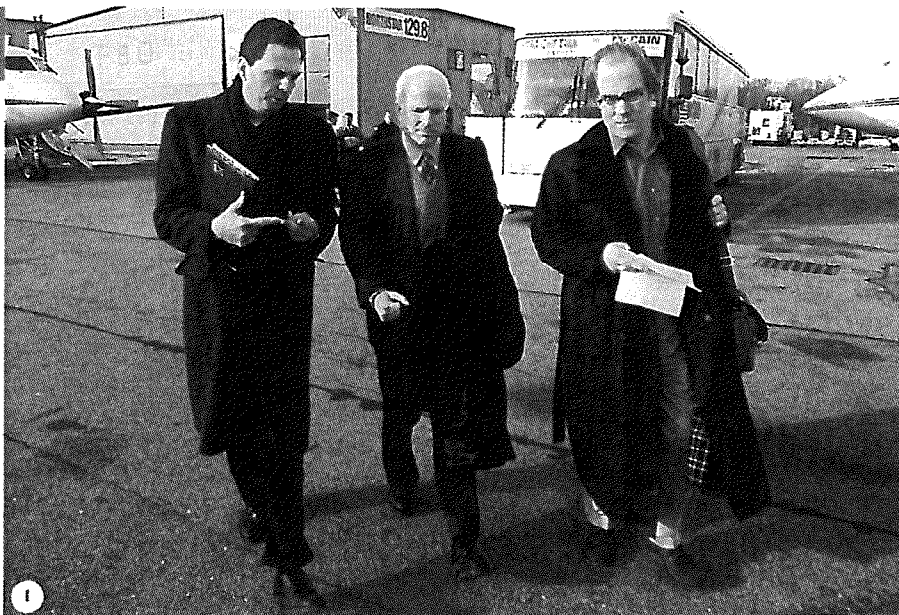
When Right to Rise erected billboards in Des Moines, Iowa, featuring such slogans as “DONALD TRUMP IS UNHINGED.” — JEB BUSH, the candidate himself was moved to wonder aloud as he drove past, “What the hell is that?” A group of donors reportedly began circulating a doctored image of the billboard among themselves. It said “LIGHT ALL THE DONOR MONEY ON FIRE”—and attributed the quote to Murphy.

Where did all the money go? Sources inside and outside the Bush circle have indicated that it wasn’t embezzled or blown on strip clubs and five-star restaurants. Rather, the money was misspent in a more prosaic, bumbling way: Right to Rise simply didn’t seem to have any sort of eye on the bottom line.

For instance, the super PAC consistently bought broadcast-television advertising in the biggest, most expensive markets at the highest possible rates. It FedExed tabletlike mailers to New Hampshire voters that played a documentary about Bush’s life, and put just 1.4 percent of its budget toward digital ads, an abnormally tiny amount for a top super PAC, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Zac Moffatt, whose digital-advertising firm, Targeted Victory, worked on behalf of several other primary candidates, calls Right to Rise “a cautionary tale for what not to do with regard to media buying,” and estimates that in the New Hampshire primary the super PAC got the same value from \$1.5 million in advertising as the Cruz campaign got from \$50,000. “Sure, the [Bush] brand was wrong,” Moffatt told me. “But the media targeting was terrible.”

Rick Wilson, a Florida ad maker who consulted for a super PAC that supported Rubio, put it more succinctly: “Mike Murphy built a money pyramid, poured gas all over it, and burned it down.”

Bush himself has indicated that he does not blame Murphy for the loss, but the question of whether Bush’s candidacy was a bad idea to begin with or merely poorly executed became the subject of rancorous debate in and around Jebworld. (It rather resembled the debate about the Iraq War, and likely had a similar answer: a bad idea, poorly executed.) And some critics consider Murphy guilty of a much greater sin than letting down Bush. It was Murphy, they say, who enabled Trump’s rise, and with it, the potential ruination of the Republican Party.



“The civilized world raised an army and entrusted it to Jeb Bush’s super PAC,” Stuart Stevens, the strategist who steered Mitt Romney’s 2012 campaign, told me. (Stevens and Murphy have a rivalry dating back to a 1994 race for governor of Pennsylvania.) “And guess what? It helped the barbarians. Had they spent \$60 million contrasting Trump and Jeb Bush, it would have been a Trump–Bush race.”

Stevens views the failure to stop Trump as an act of political malpractice. “I think Trump is the most dangerous politician I’ve ever encountered, and I did a campaign in the Congo against a guy who got accused of war crimes in The Hague,” he said. “If that guy would have won, he wouldn’t have had nuclear weapons.”

Murphy’s 35-year career in politics has been a lucrative one. In 2000, he made a name for himself as John McCain’s quippy sidekick on the Straight Talk Express—and sold his consulting firm for millions of dollars before the primaries were even over. In 2004, his new firm billed the sponsors of a Romney fund-raiser \$105,000 for “additional catering,” but according to a *Boston Globe* investigation, the catering company wasn’t aware of any such charge. (Murphy said at the time that his firm wouldn’t make any money off the event.) Murphy helped Arnold Schwarzenegger get elected—expensively—in 2003 in California. But a former Schwarzenegger aide told me Murphy was ousted from the governor’s orbit after encouraging him to call a special election to put four ballot measures before the public in 2005. All four measures lost. (Murphy denies that he pushed for the ballot measures and that he fell out of Schwarzenegger’s favor.)

Murphy reportedly told a candidate whom he was informally advising for the 2010 California gubernatorial race that he’d decided to sit out that election, but then ended up working for one of the candidate’s primary opponents, the former eBay CEO Meg Whitman. Disclosures later showed that Whitman had invested more than \$1 million in a production company belonging to Murphy. (An aspiring screenwriter, Murphy several years ago sold HBO a series about “the

#### GUYS BEHIND THE GUY

1. John McCain in 2000 with his campaign gurus, Murphy (right) and John Weaver. 2. Mitt Romney in 2012 with his strategist Stuart Stevens. 3. George Stephanopoulos and James Carville, who became celebrities after running Bill Clinton’s 1992 bid for the White House.

mercenary world of political consultants,” titled *Hacks*. It was never produced.) Whitman spent \$179 million on the campaign, including \$144 million of her own money, only to lose to Jerry Brown by 13 points. Murphy was paid \$1.3 million.

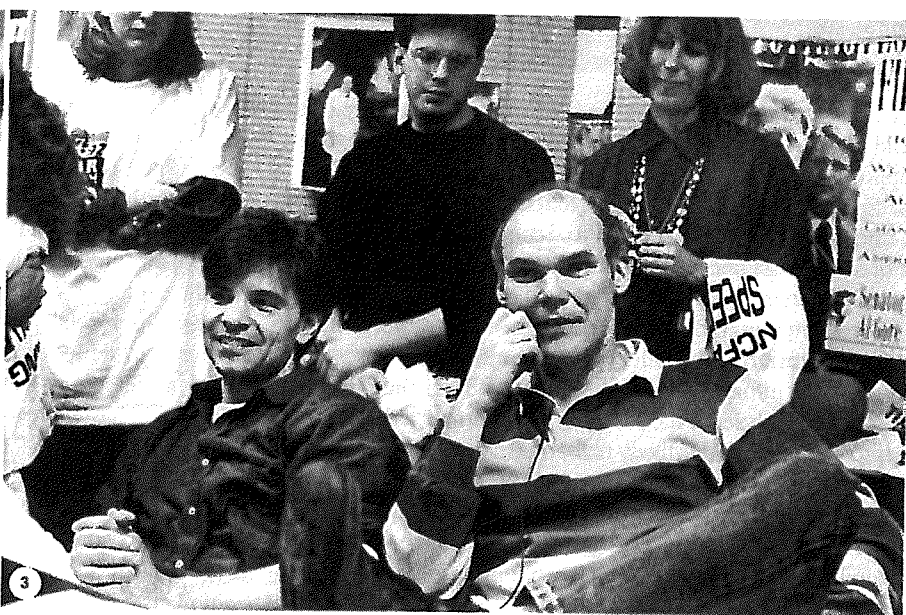
After the Bush campaign ended, an anonymously sourced CNN report charged that Murphy made at least \$14 million running Right to Rise. Murphy bitterly disputed this, telling me that his earnings were “in the comfortable mid-six figures.”

Murphy said the charge bothered him because he’d done the job not for money but out of loyalty to Bush and belief in his vision. “I charge a lot for the state campaigns because that’s how I make my living and—this is something I learned—people listen to you more when they’re paying a lot of money for your advice,” he said. “But a presidential campaign is different.”

I asked Murphy, who generally presents himself as a wise man in a kingdom of idiots, whether he thought there were a lot of *other* consultants enriching themselves by ripping off candidates. “Oh, yeah,” he said. “You could fill a stadium with them.”

**WHEN** political consultants first began plying their trade, in the 1930s, they were portrayed as sinister manipulators of public opinion. Upton Sinclair’s 1934 run for governor of California was thwarted by a smear campaign orchestrated by the first-ever political-consulting operation, Campaigns Inc. Sinclair dubbed the firm the “lie factory.”

Old-school consulting was more art than science. There was no way to measure its effect beyond whether a candidate won or lost—which meant a winning campaign could always be attributed to a consultant’s clever gambit, and a losing one blamed on a failed strategy. The press ate up these narratives, and with the rise of cable news in the 1990s, consultants began to cultivate Oz-like public images. The 1993 documentary *The War Room*, about the Bill Clinton-campaign gurus James Carville and George Stephanopoulos, turned the



two men into celebrities; man-behind-the-curtain profiles became a campaign-reporting staple. The 1930s idea of consultants as manipulative masterminds hadn't changed—but instead of being reviled, they were celebrated.

In the late 1990s, researchers began conducting field experiments to measure the outcomes of campaign tactics. And what their research revealed was that the consultants' self-serving stories were overblown. Their stratagems might help decide a very close race, but for the most part they were working in the margins. Experiments showed that in many cases, people who got phone calls or mailers encouraging them to vote turned out at basically the same rate as those who didn't. Billboards, one study found, didn't persuade anyone to vote. Yard signs made candidates feel loved, but they didn't win elections.

"The losing side is comforted, I think, by this idea of magical gurus, because it's less disconcerting than the fact that people just didn't like them very much," Brendan Nyhan, a Dartmouth political scientist who has studied the effects of consultants on elections, told me. Democrats, for example, took perverse solace in the early 2000s in the idea of Karl Rove as the evil genius behind George W. Bush's success. "Remember, in 2004, people thought Karl Rove was God," Nyhan said. "And then all of a sudden it turned out, starting in 2006, he had no magic." In 2012, Rove's American Crossroads super PAC, along with an affiliated nonprofit, spent more than \$100 million failing to prevent President Obama from winning reelection and the Democrats from keeping the Senate.

Political scientists have long been skeptical of grandiose claims about campaign tactics. Research has shown, for instance, that television ads tend to have a small effect on how or whether people vote, and any effect they do have fades quickly. That's true in statewide races as well as national ones, and despite the widely held belief that a clever negative ad can sink a rival's chances, a 2007 meta-analysis of studies

concluded: "The research literature does not bear out the idea that negative campaigning is an effective means of winning votes."

Much of the initial research relied on observational methods—compiling data on different elections and trying to control for the differences among them. In 2006, though, Rick Perry's Texas gubernatorial campaign gave researchers the chance to conduct a randomized, controlled experiment in real time. The campaign worked with political scientists to target certain parts of the state with ads while leaving other parts ad-free; the researchers then measured the difference in voter sentiment. They found that the commercials boosted Perry's standing by about five points—and that the bump disappeared less than a week after the ads stopped airing.

According to the killjoys of academia, the "Daisy" ad didn't win the 1964 election for Lyndon Johnson, and John Kerry didn't lose in 2004 because of the Bush ad showing him tacking to and fro on a wind-surfing board. There are caveats here: Ads can help an unknown candidate increase his or her name recognition, and one candidate's vastly out-advertising another may make a difference. But the effects are much smaller than is commonly believed, and in presidential races nonstop media coverage

**"In 2004, people thought Karl Rove was God. And then all of a sudden it turned out, starting in 2006, he had no magic."**

ensures that the public knows the major candidates. Nonetheless, television advertising remains presidential campaigns' single biggest expenditure—perhaps because, in many cases, the people who decide how a campaign spends its money also have a foot in the ad-making business. Romney's 2012 strategist, Stevens, was a partner in a firm that made ads for the campaign, just as Obama's 2008 strategist, David Axelrod, had been.

What about other campaign tactics? The data revolution of the past two decades has shown staples of the old consultant repertoire to be ineffective—for example, targeting your strongest precincts for get-out-the-vote efforts tends to reach

people who were going to vote for your candidate anyway, and can backfire by inadvertently turning out voters for your opponent. But Big Data allowed these blunt instruments to be fine-tuned. "Microtargeting," first used on a large scale by George W. Bush's 2004 presidential campaign, was hailed as a breakthrough because it enabled campaigns to find those people likeliest to vote for them based on their demographic and commercial profiles—occupants of rental properties, say, or premium-cable subscribers—and focus persuasion and turnout efforts accordingly. Less hyped was the fact, discovered in analyses of the method, that microtargeting based on consumer data was likely no better than the old methods at identifying potential supporters.

The 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns spawned reams of coverage of their technological wizardry. The 2012 tech team had a staff of 300 people, among them some of Silicon Valley's best and brightest; members of the team worked out of a secretive headquarters dubbed "The Cave." They drew heavily on insights from social psychology and tapped new sources of data on potential voters. Over the past four years, the Republican National Committee has spent more than \$100 million building out its data operation in an attempt to catch up. Sasha Issenberg's 2012 book, *The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns*, which details many of the new tactics, has been closely studied by Republicans trying to modernize the party's efforts.

But do the supposedly cutting-edge tactics work? It's hard to say. "There's little evidence that they moved the needle in terms of Obama's win," Nyhan told me. Partly this is because much of the data in question are proprietary and therefore unavailable for study. But when a pair of researchers attempted to calculate the effect of Obama's data operation in Florida, the state he won by the narrowest margin in 2012, they estimated that it likely accounted for just 8,525 votes out of his 74,309-vote margin of victory. In 2014, Democrats spent some \$60 million trying to replicate the Obama model in key Senate races across the country, only to lose in a wipeout.

The one campaign tactic that's consistently been found to be effective in turning out voters is field organizing—being present on the ground in a community and campaigning

door-to-door. But the effects are small: For all the hype about Obama's ground game in 2012, it likely netted him less than a point in the states where it was most active. Only a single state, Florida, was won or lost by that small a margin. "If you asked me, 'Where's the scientific evidence of what's adding value to a campaign?,' I'd say field organizing," Nyhan said. "But the campaign consultants who are most famous are the strategists, especially the ones who focus on TV. And that's where the evidence of the effectiveness of anything that people do in campaigns is the most limited."

**MANY** political scientists believe election outcomes are largely the result of factors over which candidates and their campaigns have little control. A book about the 2012 election by the political scientists Lynn Vavreck and

John Sides, *The Gamble*, positioned itself as an implicit counter to campaign chronicles like *Game Change*: In fact, they argued, there are few "game changing" moments in a campaign. Romney's leaked "47 percent" tape, for example, though seen as a devastating blow to his image, probably had little or no effect on how people voted. The vast majority of presidential elections, Vavreck and Sides write, can be forecast based on the state of the nation's economy and the approval rating of the sitting president.

Since *The Gamble's* publication, its authors have grown weary of the caricature of their position. They are not, they hasten to clarify, arguing that campaigns don't matter at all. Vavreck, a professor at UCLA,

told me she thinks consultants' main influence is at the macro level, in shaping a campaign's overall message and coaching the candidate. "It's the consultants' job to take who the person is—their fixed characteristics—and leverage it," she said. (This is perhaps what Jeb Bush's strategists failed most conspicuously to do: They didn't come up with the snappy slogans that might have made his egghead platform more accessible.)

But pollsters get paid by the poll, ad makers by the ad, phone-calling firms by the call, direct-mailers by the piece. They all have an incentive to promote their services, whether or not doing so helps the campaign win—and they face few

**Candidates are "always a little scared they can lose, and that's what the consultant exploits."**

## Dollars for Delegates

How much was spent on the 2016 candidates' behalf—by their campaigns and top-spending super PACs—per delegate who supported them in the primaries

TOTAL NUMBER OF DELEGATES

GOP ■ 2,472 | DEM ■ 4,763



Donald Trump

**\$49,891**

(Spent \$76,982,033; won 1,543 delegates)



Hillary Clinton

**\$105,566**

(Spent \$297,063,196; won 2,814 delegates)



Bernie Sanders

**\$117,731**

(Spent \$222,864,864; won 1,893 delegates)



Ted Cruz

**\$236,906**

(Spent \$132,430,558; won 559 delegates)



John Kasich

**\$248,507**

(Spent \$40,009,569; won 161 delegates)

Sources: Federal Election Commission; Center for Responsive Politics

consequences if it doesn't. The Democratic consultant Bob Shrum famously worked on seven losing presidential campaigns. The Republican pollster John McLaughlin, who told then-House Majority Leader Eric Cantor he was leading his 2014 primary by 34 points shortly before he lost, had a track record of giving clients bad information. McLaughlin still gets hired today.

Nyhan and Vavreck have watched the Trump campaign—or lack thereof—with fascination. As of early August, Clinton was outspending Trump on television ads at a rate of \$52 million to zero. Trump seemed, Nyhan told me, to offer a sort of control for the great campaign experiment: How many votes would a major-party nominee get if he ran no campaign at all?

If Trump loses, being out-campaigned will surely be a major part of the explanation pundits reach for. (As Whit Ayres, Marco Rubio's former pollster, told me at the Pollies, "If Donald Trump becomes president of the United States, then you can tell me we don't need political consultants anymore.") The Republican convention in July was a slipshod affair that underscored just how bare-bones his campaign remains, with a tiny staff, no field operation, little advertising presence—lacking even the ability to make sure a major speech wasn't plagiarized.

But will a Trump loss really have been the result of too few field offices, not enough data crunching, an insufficiency of policy speeches on teleprompters? Or will it have been because the candidate offered a profoundly alienating vision that split his own party and repelled the majority of the modern electorate—a liability no consultant could have overcome?

In a recently published book about political consulting called *Building a Business of Politics*, Adam Sheingate, a political scientist at Johns Hopkins University, argues that the consulting industry has ballooned not because its services are particularly effective, but because all the money in politics—which has skyrocketed in the past decade due to campaign-finance deregulation—has to go somewhere.

After studying the industry, Sheingate concluded that its practitioners were ardent partisans who wanted to win—but that their motivation was first and foremost financial. "The consultant is selling something to the candidate," Sheingate told me. "The confidence game is that the candidate is always a little afraid. They're always a little scared they can lose, and that's what the consultant exploits." In the words of a

consultant Sheingate quotes in his book: There's "nothing better than a scared, rich candidate."

**BEN** Carson had never run for office before deciding to seek the presidency last year, so naturally he sought a staff of professionals to guide him through the process. Carson raised more money than any other Republican candidate (not counting super PAC funds) during the time he was in the race, only to finish fourth in Iowa and drop out a month later.

When I asked Carson in March whether he had been well served by his campaign staff, the mild-mannered doctor didn't mince words. "We had people who obviously didn't have, necessarily, my best interest in mind," he said.

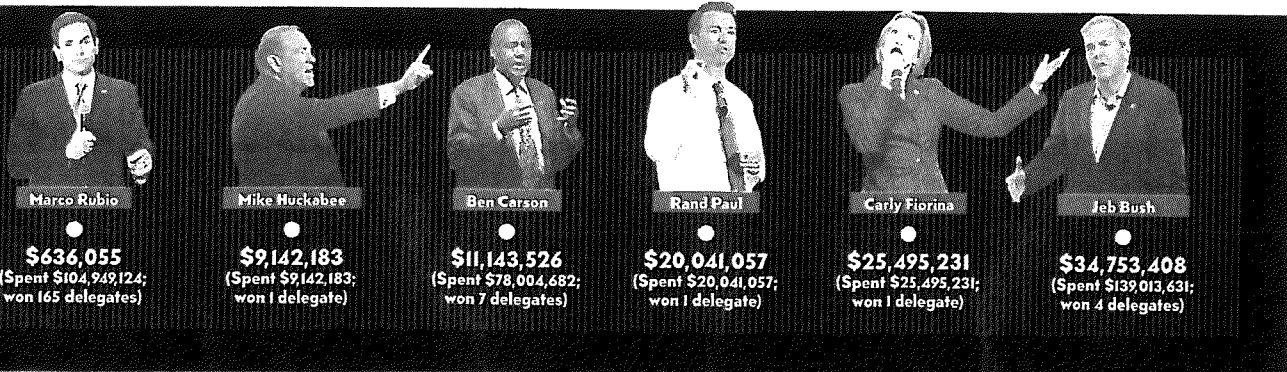
What, I asked, did they have in mind instead? "I think that it was a job," he said. "They wanted a position. A lot of money was made, and a lot of advantage was taken."

Carson and I were on speakerphone. I was in D.C., sitting in the large, tchotchke-stuffed office of his longtime friend and business manager, Armstrong Williams; Carson was at his home in Florida, preparing to depart for a campaign trip to North Dakota on behalf of Trump, to whom he had given his lukewarm endorsement. ("Does he have the fortitude, and will he appoint the right kinds of people?" Carson said to me. "That remains to be seen.")

Before Carson decided to run, he had been the subject of an extensive recruitment effort. The National Draft Ben Carson for President Committee was formed in 2013—without Carson's authorization—by John Philip Sousa IV, a financial consultant descended from the patriotic composer. By the end of 2014, the committee had raised more than \$13 million—more than Ready for Hillary, the high-profile super PAC that sought to gin up enthusiasm for Hillary Clinton's eventual candidacy. Much of the money went to consultants and direct-mail fund-raising firms.

Many view direct-mail fund-raising as a racket for fleecing the old and easily frightened, about as reputable as lottery mailings or time-share sweepstakes. Particularly on the right, there is a whole ecosystem of spurious committees that use candidates' likenesses to raise funds—money that the candidates never see. Still, plenty of legitimate candidates and causes rely on direct mail, and even the most aboveboard direct-mail operation will have high overhead due to the cost of printing and postage, and the need to send mailings to huge numbers of people in order to find the few who will

JOSEPH SOHM; ANDREW HARNIK/AP; DAVID GILDER; BEN CARSON; JEFFREY M. HARRIS/GETTY IMAGES; GJ HANEVY; ANDREW ELINE





donate. It can be impossible to distinguish a good-faith operation from a scam based on a campaign-finance report.

Whether the draft-Carson super PAC was in earnest is a matter of speculation among some political observers, who noted that the group's director, Vernon Robinson, made hundreds of thousands of dollars off the project. Sousa and several vendors also earned hefty payouts. In 2014, Williams, Carson's business manager, publicly disavowed the effort and accused the group of "misleading people" by using Carson's name. Still, the super PAC could claim success: Carson did enter the race.

Once Carson's campaign got going, it, too, raised money like gangbusters—and spent it almost as quickly. In the fourth quarter of 2015, for example, the campaign raised \$22.6 million, and paid out \$20.3 million to seven different vendors. (One of the vendors had previously been investigated for illegal practices in Ohio.)

Being a neophyte, Carson felt he had no choice but to trust the consultants, he told me. But he grew frustrated with the campaign's seeming ineptitude, such as when it failed to respond forcefully to articles that questioned Carson's autobiography, leaving the candidate to belatedly do the explaining himself. "I was always saying, 'We need to have a rapid-response operation,' but I could never get my team to respond to anything," he told me.

Carson began to wonder where all the money was going. "There were tons of consultants," he said. "One of my sons came in—and he's a very good businessman—and he started looking at the books and he said, 'Tell me, who is this? And who is this?' I had no idea who these people were. That's when I started saying, 'Wait a minute, I'm trusting the wrong people here.'"

Carson's campaign manager, Barry Bennett, was obsessed with fund-raising, and had a ticker on his computer that showed in real time the donations coming in, a former staffer told me. "Not cash on hand, just the gross," the staffer said. Bennett seemed to make no effort to build up a communications staff, bulk up Carson's policy proposals, or create a ground game. "He never talked about issues or sent out talking points," the staffer said. "On conference calls, all he would talk about was the money coming in." (Bennett left the campaign in a New Year's Eve shake-up that roiled the organization just weeks before the Iowa caucuses.)

When I spoke with Bennett, who went on to advise Trump, he didn't deny that fund-raising had been his major focus as Carson's campaign manager. "The money we were spending was to create a fund-raising list of 3 to 5 million people so that we could seed the campaign in January, February, and March," Bennett told me. "That's what campaigns do—you have to build a list! That's what you have to have in order to succeed. Otherwise you run out of money." Bennett said he was paid \$170,000 for his nine months of work on the campaign, "a big pay cut from what I was making in the private sector," and that he worked hard to make Carson a viable candidate.

After Carson dropped out, he cast himself as the victim of the whole affair. "I was told you needed this certain amount of money because of this and this and that," he told me. "I was not well versed enough to understand that those were lies."

The campaign may not have produced a presidential nominee, but it did leave behind an asset of enduring value: the list of email addresses from which it raised money. One source I talked with, who owns other conservative fund-raising email lists, estimated that the Carson campaign's list is worth \$5 million to \$6 million. "Each of those email addresses is worth about \$6 to \$9 a year," this person told me. "It's free money."

Bennett said the list would continue to pay dividends. "Ben Carson still has the best list in Republican fund-raising," he said. "He's going to make millions of dollars off that list."

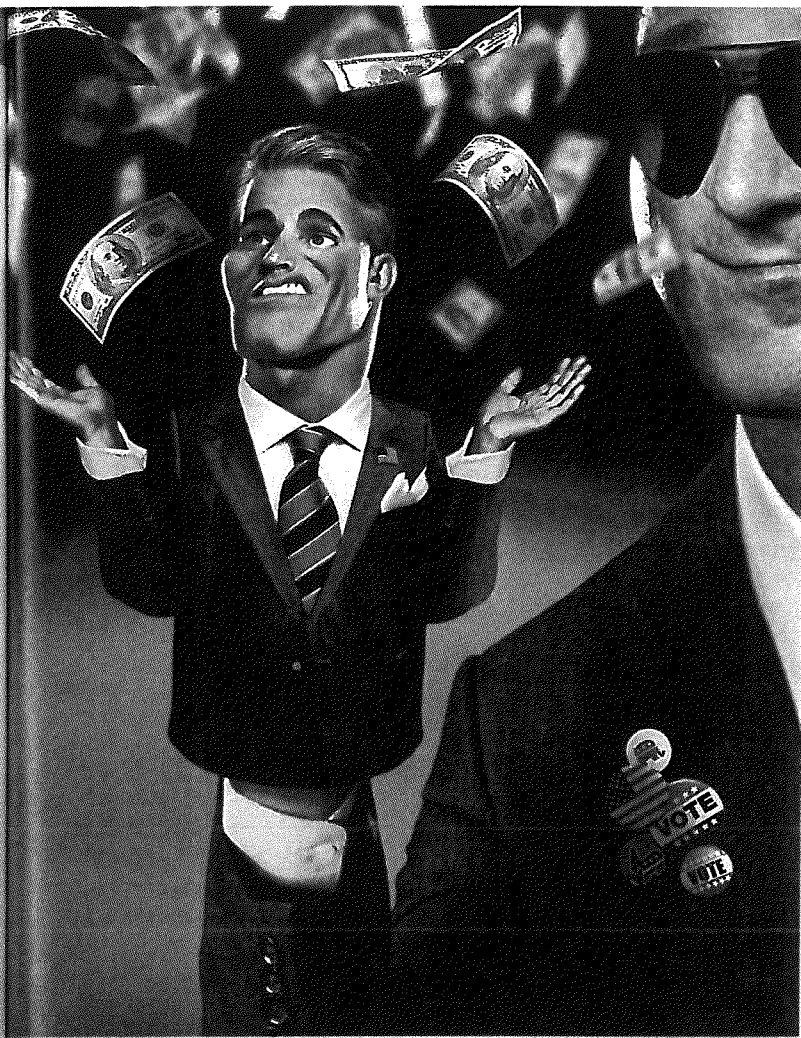
It was easy to pity Carson as a well-meaning but naive man ill-treated by a complex, corrupt world he didn't know. But the email-list owner I talked with wondered whether the candidate—who, after all, had for years made a living as an author, motivational speaker, and touter of dubious dietary supplements—really was just a helpless mark. "Was Carson in on the scam?" he said. "It's impossible to say."

**"There were tons of consultants," Ben Carson told me. "I started saying, 'Wait a minute, I'm trusting the wrong people here.'"**

**ON** the final night of the convention in San Juan, the political consultants lined up to accept awards for a job well done. The Polie Awards are bestowed promiscuously, in categories ranging from Best Use of Vote-by-Mail Ballot Request (Direct Mail) to Best Bilingual/Multilingual Automated Calls. The association's president, Mark Mellman, a leading Democratic pollster, helpfully advised the winners that they could purchase extra trophies to pass on to their clients.

The consultants' favorite stories took a familiar shape: narratives of triumph over popular will. A majority of Ohio voters wanted to legalize marijuana—but the opponents of a 2015 ballot measure convinced them it was a bad idea! The people of San Francisco were on the verge of approving a measure to regulate Airbnb—but after a series of clever ads funded by Airbnb, they came to see the measure as rife with unintended consequences! Two-thirds of Israelis thought Benjamin Netanyahu didn't deserve another term as prime minister—but Netanyahu's strategist, Aron Shaviv, convinced them his opponents were even more unacceptable!

Political-consulting tactics are becoming ever more widespread, moving into areas beyond campaigns and elections. Lobbyists whose trade once consisted mostly of wining and dining members of Congress increasingly take their arguments to the public: Berman and Company—a D.C.-based firm that represents industry lobbies—makes television ads that seek to convince the public that milk regulation is bad (for the International Dairy Foods Association) and that the Humane Society isn't helping animals (for a food-industry-backed nonprofit). The dairy group's ad, which shows a tiny man drowning in a glass of milk, took



hundreds of gallons of milk to stage, the agency's creative director, James Bowers, told a Pollies session. "Old-time lobbying doesn't work like it used to," he told me later. "You have to lobby the public."

Corporations, too, covet the tactics they see political campaigns using; firms like Blue State Digital, which grew out of Howard Dean's 2004 campaign, sell the same services—data-crunching, targeting, social-media persuasion, and so on—to the corporate sector. It's as if the consulting industry—which began on Madison Avenue and for decades took most of its inspiration from commercial advertising—has come full circle. These days, every cause and company needs a political consultant.

At the end of the ceremony, a gentle, mustached Mississippian took the stage to accept a lifetime-achievement award. Hal Malchow, a direct-mail practitioner and an early advocate of microtargeting, spent much of the 1990s trying in vain to get Democrats to incorporate his tactics. His 1999 pitch to the campaign of then-Vice President Al Gore was rejected, as was his years-long effort to get the Democratic National Committee to test the effectiveness of its direct mail. Malchow lived a lonely existence in the political wilderness—until, after the 2004 election, the press lionized the Bush campaign's use of microtargeting, and Democrats finally turned to Malchow. Belatedly, he became a guru. In 2008, his firm did work for Hillary Clinton's primary campaign.

Tearfully collecting his award, Malchow, who closed his firm a few years ago, called it "the best ending I could imagine." But when I approached him afterward to ask about the current state of political consulting, he admitted the outlook was far from clear. When he was starting out, Malchow said, consultants all thought they knew what they were doing—and they turned out to be wrong. Malchow spent much of his career debunking time-worn truisms, even when doing so was bad for his own business—he didn't mind telling clients, for example, that it takes an average of 333 pieces of direct mail to gain a single vote. The problem was that no silver bullet had arrived to take the old tactics' place. "Eighty percent of what they did in the old days didn't work," Malchow told me. "We know a lot more, but we also know what we don't know."

This year, the madcap, unorthodox Trump campaign has confronted political consultants with a pointed question. But Trump's rise could be seen as not just a repudiation of the consulting industry but a reaction to it. Campaigns these days are ever more controlled, homogenized, and bland, with carefully coiffed candidates in different states repeating the same poll-tested lines they've been fed by party hacks in D.C. From the state legislature to the U.S. Senate to the presidential stage, candidates' speeches all seem to consist of the same pabulum and jargon, their ads a pastiche of the same images of flags and workers.

Before one Pollies session, a mock presidential-campaign ad played. "Hello, it's me, candidate for president," a middle-aged white man said, walking toward the camera. A series of images flashed—the Statue of Liberty, sparks flying on a factory floor, farm machines in fields—as the candidate intoned, "My record shows that I can construct a narrative by keeping the details pretty vague. Families, the economy, faith, and education are all things I've addressed in nonspecific ways."

It was a commercial for a stock-footage company, but it felt familiar—and generic—enough to pass for a real ad. The implication was clear: Put the right images on the screen and the right words in the script, and all the candidate has to do is read the lines. Politicians aren't leaders—they're interchangeable products to be packaged and sold.

Is it any surprise that this stale, cynical process was ripe for disruption by a candidate who declined to repeat any of the old clichés? Who smashed its snoozy inoffensiveness, upended its lazy tropes? Who seemed not to have any guy-behind-the-guy pulling his strings, and to say exactly what was in his head—no matter how weird or outrageous—at all times?

Over and over in the conference sessions, the consultants talked about the importance of "authenticity." How, they wondered, could this quality, which voters seemed to prize so highly, be manufactured? The irony seemed to escape them. ■

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