

INSIDE THE TRUMP PLAN FOR 2025

A network of well-funded far-right activists is preparing for the former President's return to the White House.

By Jonathan Blitzer

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Illustration by Pablo Delcan and Danielle Del Plato

One evening in April of 2022, a hundred people milled around a patio at Mar-a-Lago, sipping champagne and waiting for Donald Trump to arrive. Mark Meadows, Trump's former chief of staff, stood in front of an archway fringed with palm trees and warmed up the crowd with jokes about the deep state. The purpose of the gathering was to raise money for the Center for Renewing America, a conservative policy shop whose most recent annual report emphasized a "commitment to end woke and weaponized government." Its founder, Russell Vought, a former head of the Office of Management and Budget under Trump, and a leading candidate to be the White House chief of staff in a second term, was in attendance, chatting amiably with the guests. He is trim and bald, with glasses and a professorial beard. His group is a kind of ivory tower for far-right Republicans, issuing white papers with titles such as "The Great Replacement in Theory and Practice." In 2021, he wrote an op-ed for *Newsweek* that asked, "Is There Anything Actually Wrong with 'Christian Nationalism'?"

The Center for Renewing America is one of roughly two dozen right-wing groups that have emerged in Washington since Trump left office. What unites them is a wealthy network based on Capitol Hill called the Conservative Partnership Institute, which many in Washington regard as the next Trump Administration in waiting. C.P.I.'s list of personnel and affiliates includes some of Trump's most fervent backers: Meadows is a senior partner; Stephen Miller, Trump's top adviser on immigration, runs an associated group called America First Legal, which styles itself as the A.C.L.U. of the MAGA movement; Jeffrey Clark, a former Justice Department lawyer facing disbarment for trying to overturn the 2020 election, is a fellow at the Center for Renewing America. All of them are expected to have high-ranking roles in the government if Trump is elected again. "C.P.I. has gathered the most talented people in the conservative movement by far," someone close to the organization told me. "They have thought deeply about what's needed to create the infrastructure and the resources for a more anti-establishment conservative movement."

C.P.I. was founded in 2017 by Jim DeMint, a former adman from South Carolina who spent eight years in the Senate before resigning to lead the Heritage Foundation. During that time, he was one of Washington's most notorious partisan combatants. As a senator, he attacked his Republican colleagues for being insufficiently conservative, tanking their bills and raising money to unseat them in primaries. Mitch McConnell, the Senate Minority Leader, called him "an innovator in Republican-on-Republican violence." With C.P.I., DeMint wanted to create a base of operations for insurgents like himself. "If you're not getting criticized in Washington," he once said, "you're probably part of the problem."

Other conservative groups have defined Republican Presidencies: The Heritage Foundation staffed the Administration of Ronald Reagan, the American Enterprise Institute that of George W. Bush. But C.P.I. is categorically different from its peers. It's not a think tank—it's an incubator and an activist hub that funds other organizations, coordinates with conservative members of the House and Senate, and works as a counterweight to G.O.P. leadership. The effort to contest the 2020 election results and the protests of January 6, 2021, were both plotted at C.P.I.'s headquarters, at 300 Independence Avenue. "Until seven years ago, it didn't exist, and no entity like it existed," Senator Mike Lee, a Republican from Utah, told me. "It's grown by leaps and bounds."

C.P.I. and its constellation of groups, most of which are nonprofits, raised nearly two hundred million dollars in 2022. The organization has bought up some fifty million dollars' worth of real estate in and around Washington, including multiple properties on the Hill. A mansion on twenty-two hundred acres in eastern Maryland hosts trainings for congressional staff and conservative activists. Four political-action committees have rented space in C.P.I.'s offices, and many more belonging to members of Congress pay to use C.P.I.'s facilities, such as studios for podcast recordings and TV hits. The House Freedom Caucus, a group of three dozen hard-line anti-institutionalist Republican lawmakers, and the Steering Committee, a similar

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group in the Senate, headed by Lee, hold weekly meetings at C.P.I.'s headquarters. Senator Ron Johnson, a Republican from Wisconsin, called the organization a "gathering site" that offered "regular contact" with the power brokers of the conservative movement. He told me, "You walk into the building and you can talk to Mark Meadows or Jim DeMint if they're there, or Russ Vought."

At the time of the event at Mar-a-Lago, in the spring of 2022, right-wing political circles were in a state of charged anticipation. Trump had not yet announced his reelection bid, but inflation was high, Joe Biden was unpopular, and pollsters were anticipating a Republican rout in the upcoming midterms. "The left tried to drag America further into a dark future of totalitarianism, chaotic elections, and cultural decay," C.P.I.'s leaders wrote. Those in attendance knew that Trump would soon enter the race. The question was what, exactly, they might get out of it.

Shortly after 6 P.M., Trump strode onto the patio, wearing his customary dark suit and a blue tie, and launched into a stem-winder. "It was so fucking funny," the person close to C.P.I. told me. "Almost nothing was related to the Center for Renewing America other than a reference to how good Russ was. He was riffing on whatever was on his mind." Trump recounted a trip that he'd taken to Iraq as President, but he kept digressing to complain about a thirteen-billion-dollar aircraft carrier that he'd commissioned. At one point, he turned to the culture wars but couldn't remember the phrase "critical race theory." Vought, standing nearby, had to prompt him. "He was burning down the house," the person told me. "Everyone was loving it."

Still, one aspect of the speech caught the attention of C.P.I.'s executives. Ever since Trump was acquitted in his first impeachment trial, in 2020, he has threatened to purge the government of anyone he considered disloyal. His defenders are united in the belief that career bureaucrats foiled his first-term plans from inside the government. C.P.I., which has spent years placing conservative job seekers in congressional offices, is now vetting potential staffers for a second Trump term. One of its groups, the American Accountability Foundation, has been investigating the personal profiles and social-media posts of federal employees to determine who might lack fealty to Trump. "The key throughout the speech was that Trump complained about his personnel," the attendee said. "He said he had these bad generals, bad Cabinet secretaries. That was a big signal to the people there."

Six years earlier, on a Monday in late March, cars ferrying some of the country's most influential conservatives, including the Republican senators Jeff Sessions and Tom Cotton, began arriving at the Washington offices of the law firm Jones Day. DeMint, then the head of the Heritage Foundation, and Leonard Leo, the vice-president of the Federalist Society, entered discreetly through a parking garage, as they'd been instructed. Newt Gingrich, who wanted the press to see him, insisted on using the firm's front door. They were attending a private meeting with Trump, who was rapidly gaining in the Republican primary but remained anathema to much of the G.O.P. establishment. "People in the conservative movement suddenly realized that Trump could be the horse that they could ride to victory," a former senior Heritage staffer told me. "He was being shepherded around the conservative policy world. DeMint was a part of that."

As early as January, 2016, DeMint predicted that Trump would win the Republican nomination. It was an unpopular position among conservatives, many of whom felt more ideologically aligned with Senator Ted Cruz, of Texas. In a conference room at Jones Day, Trump gave a brief speech and opened the floor to questions. Leo asked him whom he'd nominate for federal judgeships. Antonin Scalia, the conservative stalwart on the Supreme Court, had died the previous month. Trump replied, "Why don't I put out a list publicly of people who could be the sort of people I would put on the Supreme Court?" DeMint immediately volunteered Heritage for the job of drafting it.

The Heritage Foundation was founded in the nineteen-seventies by Edwin Feulner, a Republican operative with a doctorate in political science. Under his direction, the think tank became the country's leading bastion of conservative policy, with an annual budget exceeding eighty million dollars. When DeMint took over, in 2013, traditionalists on the organization's board were concerned that his rebellious style would diminish the group's reputation for serious research. He confirmed their suspicions by hiring several of his Senate aides. The former Heritage staffer said, "There were cultural differences between existing leadership and the DeMint team."

But DeMint's arrival reflected changes already under way at the organization. In 2010, as the Tea Party emerged as a force in conservative politics, the think tank launched an advocacy arm called Heritage Action, which issued scorecards evaluating legislators' conservatism and deputized a network of local activists as "sentinels" to enforce a populist agenda. Vought, who'd previously worked as a staffer in House leadership, helped lead the operation. Under DeMint, the group became merciless in its attacks on rank-and-file Republican lawmakers. "Heritage Action was created to lobby the Hill, but they took it one step

further,” James Wallner, a lecturer in political science at Clemson University, who worked with DeMint in the Senate and at Heritage, told me. “They had a grassroots army. They used tens of thousands of activists to target people.”

After the meeting with Trump, in 2016, some of DeMint’s staff objected to the task of drawing up a list of potential judges, arguing that Heritage was overcommitting itself. This was typically the domain of the Federalist Society, which was putting forth its own list of judicial nominees. But DeMint, sensing an opportunity to maximize his clout with Trump, dismissed the concerns. That August, after Trump became the Party’s nominee, Heritage was enlisted to participate in the Presidential transition in the event of a Trump victory. Chris Christie, the governor of New Jersey at the time, was overseeing the effort and put Feulner, who was then the chair of Heritage’s board of trustees, in charge of domestic policy. Feulner later told the *Times* that Heritage saw a greater opportunity to influence policy under Trump than it had under Reagan. “No. 1, he did clearly want to make very significant changes,” Feulner said of Trump. “No. 2, his views on so many things were not particularly well formed.” He added, “If he somehow pulled the election off, we thought, wow, we could really make a difference.”

Heritage was already primed. The year after DeMint took over, he had begun an initiative called the Project to Restore America, which worked to build up a reserve of reliably conservative personnel. The morning after Trump won, DeMint called a meeting in an auditorium at Heritage headquarters. Many staffers had been there all night watching the returns in a state of elation. “We were criticized by a lot of our friends in the movement for even going to meetings with Trump,” DeMint said, according to the *Times*. Then, quoting a line from the eighties TV show “The A-Team,” he added, “I love it when a plan comes together.”

The following day, Steve Bannon, Trump’s senior adviser, summoned Christie to his office on the fourteenth floor of Trump Tower, in New York. “We’ve decided to make a change,” Bannon told him. Mike Pence, the incoming Vice-President, and Jared Kushner, the President’s son-in-law, were replacing him. Christie wrote in his 2019 memoir that thirty volumes of policy and staff plans collected in large binders over several months “were tossed in a Trump Tower dumpster, never to be seen again.” Christie’s firing set off a scramble to finish the job of staffing the new Administration and preparing a slate of agenda-setting policies before Trump was sworn in. Heritage now had an even more direct role to play. Pence was friendly with DeMint, and a former Sessions aide, who was appointed to lead the transition’s daily operations, was close with Ed Corrigan, a former executive director of the Senate Steering Committee who was then a vice-president at the Heritage Foundation.

Heritage went on to fill hundreds of jobs throughout virtually every federal agency, and some of the President’s most prominent Cabinet officials—including Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of Education; Scott Pruitt, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency; and Rick Perry, the Secretary of Energy—had appeared on the foundation’s lists of recommendations. “DeMint told friends and colleagues that he was proudest of his work at Heritage in placing Heritage employees into the Administration,” a DeMint associate told me. “That was a big deal.”

Still, Heritage’s board remained fiercely divided over DeMint. Mickey Edwards, a founding Heritage trustee, said at the time that DeMint had turned “a highly respected think tank” into “a partisan tool” for the Tea Party. Wallner, who joined Heritage as its research director in the summer of 2016, told me, “I walked into a civil war.” He recalled meeting a board member at a hotel bar near the White House who asked outright, “Are you on team DeMint?” Such critics had expected Trump to lose spectacularly in November, discrediting DeMint in the process.

Before Trump’s Inauguration, DeMint requested a new contract, but the board refused. The following spring, DeMint and his closest advisers went to San Diego for the annual Heritage donor retreat. The night before their flight home, they learned that DeMint was being fired. Corrigan was there, along with Wallner; Wesley Denton, a former DeMint staffer; and Bret Bernhardt, DeMint’s ex-chief of staff. “We had put our heart and soul into this,” Wallner told me. “It was shocking.”

According to a study by the Brookings Institution, there was more staff turnover in the first thirty-two months of Trump’s Presidency than there had been in the entire first terms of each of his five predecessors. Inside the White House, a former senior official told me, Trump was constantly enraged that his Cabinet wouldn’t break the law for him. He wanted the Department of Homeland Security to shoot migrants crossing the Rio Grande, the Defense Department to draw up plans to invade Mexico, and the Internal Revenue Service to audit his critics. Trump didn’t understand why the government couldn’t revoke the security clearances of former intelligence officials who criticized him on CNN. The official said that Trump “talked about firing large numbers of the federal workers,” to eliminate any further checks on his agenda.

The tumult presented an opportunity for outsiders like DeMint. He and his associates had started brainstorming their next moves before their flight from San Diego touched down in Washington. “You don’t need a think tank,” Wallner recalled telling DeMint. Their collective expertise was in Congress, where Party leadership always seemed to have the advantage of better and more extensive staffing. What if they levelled the playing field by helping to recruit conservative personnel, and schooling them in how to be more effective activists? DeMint and his group could train a new class of staffers and place them within the system.

Conservatives in Washington also needed somewhere to gather, share ideas, and strategize. From 2011 to 2015, a group of Republican House members, who would eventually form the Freedom Caucus, had regularly met in the kitchen of a Heritage executive. One night, his wife was hosting a work dinner, so the group relocated to a restaurant called Tortilla Coast, which became their new meeting spot. On occasion, when they tried to book space at the Capitol Hill Club, an exclusive Republican hangout in Washington, Party leadership made sure that their request was declined. “The thing that made Heritage so powerful were the coalitions they could build,” Wallner told me. “That was the stuff DeMint loved.” The sentiment on the plane, he went on, was “Let’s do this thing that DeMint loves to do, that’s so vital. It would be like a WeWork for conservatives.”

On May 10, 2017, DeMint and the others filed incorporation papers for the Conservative Partnership Institute. Their lawyer, who was also representing them in severance negotiations with Heritage, was Cleta Mitchell, a movement mainstay in her sixties who was, as the person close to C.P.I. told me, “the attorney for pretty much any new conservative group that was starting in Washington.” She became C.P.I.’s secretary. The institute’s accountant was a close associate of Leonard Leo’s. It was a lean operation at first: seven employees and a rented office on Pennsylvania Avenue above a liquor store and an Asian-fusion restaurant. At the end of its first year, the group’s total assets and liabilities were less than a million dollars.

Then the White House called. The President had been accusing his personnel of deliberately undercutting him, but his top aides were, in fact, struggling to fill an increasing number of vacancies within the executive agencies. “It was an ‘Aha!’ moment for C.P.I.,” the person close to the organization told me. “The White House needed staffing help. People who joined the Administration were either R.N.C. hacks who didn’t like Trump or they were Trump-campaign supporters who could barely get their pants on in the morning.”

One day in June, 2018, Hill staffers working for conservative members of Congress received an e-mail: “Interested in a job at the White House?” C.P.I. was hosting a job fair, at the Dirksen Senate Office Building. The director of the White House’s personnel office would be in attendance, along with other senior officials. C.P.I. had been conceived to help staff congressional offices, but it was scaling up. “They needed a national figure,” another former DeMint staffer told me. “Their brand is bigger with Trump.”

A year later, Trump was impeached for what he called a “perfect phone call” with the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, in which Trump suggested that U.S. military aid to Ukraine might depend on Zelensky agreeing to investigate the business dealings of Joe Biden’s son Hunter. At the impeachment trial, two members of the Trump Administration, Alexander Vindman, of the National Security Council, and Marie Yovanovitch, the recently fired Ambassador to Ukraine, testified against the President. Senator Cruz, who was coördinating with the President’s legal team, ran an impeachment “war room” out of the basement of C.P.I.’s headquarters. Using C.P.I. equipment, he also recorded a podcast, called “Verdict with Ted Cruz,” which he taped after each day’s testimony, attacking the proceedings as a partisan sham. “Verdict” was downloaded more than a million times, making it one of the most popular political podcasts in the country.

A few weeks after Trump was acquitted, on a party-line vote in the Senate, a C.P.I. executive named Rachel Bovard addressed an audience at the Council for National Policy, a secretive network of conservative activists. They’d assembled for a board-of-governors luncheon at a Ritz-Carlton in California. “We work very closely . . . with the Office of Presidential Personnel at the White House,” Bovard said, in footage obtained by Documented, a Washington-based watchdog group. “Because we see what happens when we don’t vet these people. That’s how we got Lieutenant Colonel Vindman, O.K.? That’s how we got Marie Yovanovitch. All these people that led the impeachment against President Trump shouldn’t have been there in the first place.”

By then, conservative activists, including Ginni Thomas, the wife of the Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, were assembling lists of “bad people” in the government for Trump to fire or demote. Government officials on the lists were often identified as either pro-Trump or anti-Trump. But behavior that counted as anti-Trump could be little more than an instance of someone obeying the law or observing ordinary bureaucratic procedure. In one memo, in which a Trump loyalist argued

against appointing a former U.S. Attorney who was up for a job at the Treasury Department, a list of infractions included an unwillingness to criminally investigate multiple women who had accused Brett Kavanaugh of sexual misconduct, according to Axios. In October, 2020, Trump issued an executive order that was largely overlooked in the midst of the pandemic and that fall's election. Known as Schedule F, it stripped career civil servants of their job protections, making it much easier for the President to replace them with handpicked appointees.

The following month, when Trump refused to accept his election loss, "there were people in the White House who operated under the assumption that they were not leaving," a former aide said. One of them was John McEntee, a caustic thirty-year-old who'd once been Trump's personal assistant and was now in charge of the Presidential Personnel Office. (In 2018, John Kelly, who was then Trump's chief of staff, had fired McEntee for failing a security clearance owing to a gambling habit, but Trump rehired him two years later.) Young staffers were scared that McEntee might find out if they started interviewing for other positions. "There was fear of retribution if it got back to him," the former aide said. Other White House officials, such as Meadows, were clear-eyed about the election results but vowed to fight them anyway. Meadows discreetly told a few staffers that, when Trump's term was over, they should join him at the Conservative Partnership Institute. "C.P.I. was his ticket to be that pressure point on Capitol Hill," one of the staffers told me. "He wanted to be the guy who held Congress to the MAGA agenda."

From the start, C.P.I. was involved in efforts to cast doubt on the 2020 election results. One Freedom Caucus member recalled, "Election Day was Tuesday, and we got back to the Capitol the following Monday. Tuesday, they're meeting at C.P.I. and talking about how to get Trump sworn in on January 20th." On November 9th, during the Senate Steering Committee's regular meeting at C.P.I., Sidney Powell, a conservative lawyer, gave a talk about challenging the election results. "My purpose in having the meeting was to socialize with Republican senators the fact that POTUS needs to pursue his legal remedies," Senator Lee, of Utah, told Meadows in a text. "You have in us a group of ready and loyal advocates who will go to bat for him."

By the end of December, many Republicans, including Lee, had given up on Powell. She was citing rigged elections in Venezuela as evidence that the voting-machine company Dominion had tampered with ballots cast for Trump, but, despite frequent requests from Trump loyalists, she could never substantiate the claims. Hard-core partisans came up with a new plan: they wanted to disrupt the process by which the government would certify the election results, on January 6, 2021. Cleta Mitchell, the secretary of C.P.I. and a lawyer for Trump, was central in advancing this idea. She had gone into the 2020 race believing that Democrats would attempt to steal votes. "I was absolutely persuaded and believed very strongly that President Trump would be reelected and that the left and the Democrats would do everything they could to unwind it," she later said.

Two days after the election, Mitchell wrote an e-mail to the legal academic John Eastman, encouraging him to craft a case that the Vice-President had the unilateral authority to throw out the election results in seven states, where the legislatures could then choose new slates of pro-Trump electors. Pence, who consulted his own legal experts, was unconvinced. But Eastman hardly needed to persuade Trump, who urged his supporters to march on the Capitol to pressure Pence into blocking the certification process. Eventually, Eastman would be indicted in Arizona and Georgia on conspiracy, fraud, and racketeering charges for his role in trying to overturn the election. (He pleaded not guilty.)

Much of the effort to turn people out for the January 6th protest took place at C.P.I. "There were a series of conference calls," the Freedom Caucus member told me. "Mark Meadows was on a lot of them. Trump was on more than one. The rally was a big thing that C.P.I. and Freedom Caucus members were involved in. The idea was that they were going to get everybody together on the Mall. That was all discussed at C.P.I." (A C.P.I. spokesperson told me, "No idea what they're talking about. C.P.I. had absolutely no involvement in these events.")

On the afternoon of January 2nd, Mitchell joined the President on an hour-long phone call with Georgia's secretary of state, in which Trump told him to "find 11,780 votes," the number he needed to win the state. Later that evening, members of the Freedom Caucus, including Jim Jordan and Scott Perry, the caucus's chairman, were scheduled to meet at C.P.I. to strategize about how to get their constituents to show up on January 6th. "Meadows was originally going to participate in person, but they moved it to conference call just to cover a wider breadth of people that weren't in town," Cassidy Hutchinson, Meadows's aide, said in an interview with lawyers from the January 6th Committee. The President also dialed in.

Even after the riot at the Capitol, Mitchell continued to contest the 2020 returns from her perch at C.P.I. For some of the more elaborate electoral challenges, such as audits of the results in Arizona and Georgia, which persisted after Biden had taken

office, it was important to the organizers that the process seem legitimate and serious—and therefore independent of Trump. According to an investigation by Documented, C.P.I. used an accounting mechanism to hide the fact that the former President was funding part of the organization’s recount efforts. On July 26, 2021, Trump’s political-action committee, Save America, donated a million dollars to C.P.I. Two days later, a new nonprofit called the American Voting Rights Foundation, or A.V.R.F., was registered in Delaware; its direct controlling entity was another group tied to C.P.I. The same day, Mitchell sent an e-mail to Cyber Ninjas, a private company that a group of far-right state legislators in Arizona had recruited to conduct an audit of the Presidential results in Maricopa County. C.P.I. then paid a million dollars to A.V.R.F. According to the *Guardian*, it was the “only known donation that the group has ever received.” On July 29th, in an e-mail on which a C.P.I. executive was copied, Mitchell explained that A.V.R.F. was contributing a million dollars to the Arizona audit.

This spring, I received some friendly but unencouraging advice from a person close to DeMint: I shouldn’t count on speaking with him or his advisers. They were highly suspicious of mainstream attention. DeMint is now more of a figurehead at C.P.I. than an active leader of the organization. Meadows, who joined C.P.I. a week after leaving the Trump White House, and now receives an annual salary of eight hundred thousand dollars from the organization, is primarily a fund-raiser. He was indicted last year for election interference. (He pleaded not guilty.) Being in legal trouble is often a badge of honor in Trump’s circles, but Meadows has fallen under suspicion from some of his old allies. ABC News reported last year that he had secretly spoken with federal prosecutors who were investigating the former President, a story that Meadows has since disputed. A recent *Times Magazine* article called him “the least trusted man in Washington.”

The daily operations of C.P.I. are run by Corrigan, its president, and Denton, the group’s chief operating officer. Corrigan declined to speak with me, but Denton was eventually willing to chat. One morning in May, we met in a coffee shop in the basement of a Senate office building. He is genial and plainspoken, with a youthful air and a beard that hangs thickly off his chin. During DeMint’s eight years in the Senate, Denton served as his director of communications, and they moved to Heritage together, in 2013. With the exception of a brief stint in the Trump Administration, where Denton worked at the Office of Management and Budget with Vought, he has been at C.P.I. since its creation.

“There’s nothing complicated about what we do,” he told me. “We train staff and place staff. That’s it. There are some outgrowths of that, in terms of supporting new groups. But, basically, we’re here to support those who are in the fight.”

In 2021, C.P.I.’s board made a fateful and, in retrospect, wise decision. High-ranking figures from the Trump Administration were leaving the government and needed a place to land during the Biden years. “It’s not hard to be a liberal in D.C.,” Denton told me. “It’s not the same for our side.” But C.P.I.’s founders were wary of creating just another version of the Heritage Foundation. “We had the opportunity to build a vast, huge bureaucratic organization when all our friends were coming out of the Trump Administration,” Denton said. “Instead, we helped them set up their own organizations.”

The structure of these groups could seem both byzantine and incestuous to an outsider, but the idea, Denton told me, was “to insure mission alignment.” Stephen Miller formed America First Legal, a public-interest law group that has primarily targeted “woke corporations,” school districts, and the Biden Administration. Vought started the Center for Renewing America, which generated policy proposals as though the Trump Administration had never ended. Corrigan and Denton were on the board of Vought’s group; Vought, Corrigan, and Denton sat on the board of Miller’s group. As more organizations joined the fold, their boards increasingly overlapped, and the roster of ideologues and Trump loyalists grew. Gene Hamilton and Matthew Whitaker, key figures from the Trump D.O.J., worked at America First Legal. Ken Cuccinelli, from the Department of Homeland Security; Mark Paoletta, from the Office of Management and Budget; and Kash Patel, from the Department of Defense, became fellows at Vought’s group.

By the end of 2021, C.P.I. had helped form eight new groups, each with a different yet complementary mission. The American Accountability Foundation focussed on attacking Biden’s nominees. The State Freedom Caucus Network helped state legislators create their own versions of the House Freedom Caucus in order to challenge their local Republican establishments. The Election Integrity Network, run by Mitchell, trained volunteers to monitor polling places and investigate state and local election officials. American Moment concentrated on cultivating the next generation of conservative staffers in Washington.

C.P.I. connected the founders of these groups with its network of donors and, in some instances, helped support the organizations until they could raise money for themselves. As American Moment waited for the I.R.S. to formalize its nonprofit tax status, for example, C.P.I. served as a fiscal sponsor, allowing donors to earmark money for the new group by giving it to C.P.I. The organization also offered its partners access to an array of shared resources: discounted real estate, accounting

services, legal representation. “This all had an in-kind value of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars,” the person close to C.P.I. told me. C.P.I.’s accounting firm, called Compass Professional, was run by Corrigan’s brother; its law firm, Compass Legal, was headed by Scott Gast, a lawyer in the Trump White House.

Aside from C.P.I., Compass Legal’s most lucrative client to date, according to F.E.C. filings, has been Trump himself, whose campaign and political-action committees have paid the firm four hundred thousand dollars in the past two years. Another major client was the National Rifle Association, which paid the firm more than three hundred thousand dollars in 2022. Compass Legal was established in March, 2021, two months after C.P.I.’s lead lawyer, Cleta Mitchell, was forced to resign from her job as a partner at the law firm Foley & Lardner. Her participation in Trump’s phone call to the Georgia secretary of state had caused too much controversy. She blamed her departure on a “massive pressure campaign” orchestrated by “leftist groups.” In a subsequent C.P.I. annual report, the group said that a large part of its mission was helping conservatives “survive the Leftist purge and ‘cancel-proof’ conservative organizations.”

This was not simply the rhetoric of conservative victimhood. Andrew Kloster, a former employee of Compass Legal who is now Representative Matt Gaetz’s general counsel, described one of C.P.I.’s goals as “de-risking public service on the right.” For anyone who might run afoul of mainstream opinion, C.P.I. had created an alternative, fully self-sufficient ecosystem. One part of it was material: recording studios, direct-mail services, accounting and legal resources, salaried jobs and fellowships. The other element was cultural. C.P.I. was demonstrating to Trump allies that, if they took bold and possibly illegal action in service of the cause, they wouldn’t face financial ruin or pariah status in Washington.

Over coffee at the Capitol, in May, Kloster, who is bald with a bushy beard, explained the story behind a legal-defense fund that he’d helped create, called Courage Under Fire. It supported people who’d been “targeted for their civil service in conservative Administrations, including those indicted for fighting the 2020 election,” he said. The fund has spent more than three million dollars to date, according to the *Washington Post*, with the money going toward legal costs incurred by John Eastman; Mike Roman, a former Trump-campaign operative; and Peter Navarro, a former economic adviser to Trump who has since been convicted of contempt of Congress for failing to comply with a subpoena related to the January 6th investigation. “We started with a lot of Trump advisers,” Kloster said. “It’s a large class.” Eastman, he added, was a prime example: “He has been targeted for legal advice he gave in the course of his duties consulting with former President Trump. He’s being charged with criminal fraud. That’s for the mob lawyer in ‘The Godfather’ trying to knowingly facilitate crimes, not for someone saying, ‘Here’s what I think the law is.’ ”

Courage Under Fire was created by Personnel Policy Operations, a nonprofit in the C.P.I. network which, in 2022, spent more than a million dollars on lawyers for Mark Meadows and Jeffrey Clark, according to NOTUS, an online news site. C.P.I. maintains that the groups it has launched are independent. “We don’t control them,” the C.P.I. spokesperson said. But Brendan Fischer, the deputy executive director of Documented, pointed out that in 2022 nearly all the money spent by Personnel Policy Operations came from C.P.I., and that virtually all such spending went toward legal defense. He told me, “The most reasonable inference is that they were routing money from C.P.I. to Personnel Policy Operations to pay for Meadows’s and Clark’s legal fees.” (The C.P.I. spokesperson said, “Liberal groups like these have made wild claims against the right for years that go nowhere. C.P.I. is in compliance with all laws for nonprofits.”)

Tim Dunn, a billionaire Texas oilman and a major donor to C.P.I., has been tapped specifically to fund the group’s legal-defense efforts. When Scott Perry, of Pennsylvania, the former chairman of the Freedom Caucus, faced legal scrutiny for his involvement in January 6th—he had organized an attempt to contest the results in his state and, after ignoring a congressional subpoena, was ordered by a judge to turn over his cell phone to prosecutors—Meadows arranged to pay his legal fees by asking Dunn for the money, someone with knowledge of the arrangement told me. (Perry’s campaign and C.P.I. both denied this account. “This is completely false,” the C.P.I. spokesperson said. Dunn could not be reached for comment.)

C.P.I.’s headquarters is a three-story town house with a blue door, on a leafy block near the Capitol. Inside, a warren of offices gives way to a series of parlorlike spaces with high ceilings. There are luminous conference rooms upstairs, each named for a prominent donor.

Last summer, I visited 300 Independence Avenue to interview Vought. At the time, we were discussing his role in creating a congressional subcommittee to advance a dominant Republican narrative in the House: that Democrats had weaponized the federal government against conservatives. It was a kind of unified theory of the deep state, which held that the Justice Department and the U.S. intelligence community had colluded to silence right-wing voices. It had the added utility of casting Trump

as the ultimate martyr of the conservative movement. Each of his legal travails, Vought said, proved that Democrats were shamelessly engaged in “lawfare.”

These days, Vought has appeared in the news as a key architect of a second-Trump-term agenda, alongside some of the other usual suspects: Stephen Miller, Gene Hamilton, Jeffrey Clark, and Kash Patel. Trump has been explicit about his intention to exact revenge on political enemies. “I am your warrior, I am your justice,” he told a crowd of supporters in March of last year. “And, for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution.” Three months later, after his arraignment in Miami for allegedly mishandling classified documents and obstructing a federal investigation, he added, “I will appoint a real special prosecutor to go after the most corrupt President in the history of the United States of America, Joe Biden, and the entire Biden crime family.”

Vought and Clark, meanwhile, have been advancing a formal rationale to break the long-standing expectation that the D.O.J. should operate independently of the President. The norm has been in place since Watergate, but they have argued that Trump could run the department like any other executive agency. Clark published his case on the Center for Renewing America’s Web site under the title “The U.S. Justice Department Is Not Independent.” In early 2021, while Trump was fighting the results of the election, he wanted to make Clark the Attorney General, but the entire senior leadership of the department threatened to resign en masse. Now, if Clark gets a top job at the D.O.J., he is expected to use the position to try to remake the department as an instrument of the White House.

Stephen Miller, at America First Legal, has been devising plans to enact a nationwide crackdown on immigration, just as he had hoped to carry out on a vast scale in the first Trump term. The impediment then was operational: a lack of personnel to make arrests, a shortage of space to detain people, resistance from Democratic officials at the state and local levels. Miller has since vowed to increase deportations by a factor of ten, to a million people a year, according to the *Times*. The President would have to deputize federal troops to carry out the job, because there wouldn’t be enough agents at the Department of Homeland Security to do it. The government would need to build large internment camps, and, in the event that Congress refused to appropriate the money required, the President would have to divert funds from the military.

Many of the other agenda items related to immigration that were delayed, blocked, or never fully realized during the chaos of the first term would be reinstated to more extreme effect in a second: an expanded ban on refugees from Muslim-majority countries, a revocation of visas for students engaged in certain forms of campus protests, an end to birthright citizenship. “Any activists who doubt President Trump’s resolve in the slightest are making a drastic error,” Miller told the *Times* last November. “Trump will unleash the vast arsenal of federal powers to implement the most spectacular migration crackdown.”

The overarching scheme for the second Trump term, called Project 2025, follows an established Washington tradition. It is being organized by the Heritage Foundation and has taken the form of a nine-hundred-page policy tract. But the scale of this undertaking, which is costing more than twenty million dollars, is bigger than anything Heritage has previously attempted. The organization has hired the technology company Oracle to build a secure database to house the personnel files of some twenty thousand potential Administration staffers. Kevin Roberts, the current president of Heritage, has also enlisted the participation of more than a hundred conservative groups, as well as top figures from C.P.I.: Vought, Corrigan, Miller, and Saurabh Sharma, the president of American Moment. “These were the key nodes,” the person close to C.P.I. told me. “Roberts was paying Center for Renewing America, American Moment, and America First Legal to do parts of the project.” (Heritage did not respond to requests for comment.)

The fact that Heritage was helping to staff a full-fledged MAGA operation, the person went on, was a reflection of C.P.I.’s mounting influence. Two years ago, Roberts addressed the National Conservatism Conference, an annual gathering of far-right activists, which was hosted by an organization that is now associated with C.P.I. “I come not to invite national conservatives to join our movement but to acknowledge the plain truth that Heritage is already part of yours,” he said. Last year, Corrigan, who is on the steering committee of Project 2025, was invited to speak at Heritage’s fiftieth-anniversary conference. “The leadership at Heritage has brought back the C.P.I. folks even though they got pushed out six years before,” the person close to C.P.I. told me. “Kevin is being realistic. He needs to make peace with these guys.”

My source, who has been involved in Project 2025, outlined a few immediate actions that Trump would take if he won. Christopher Wray, the director of the F.B.I., would be fired “right away,” he told me. Even though Trump nominated Wray to the position, the far right has blamed Wray for the agency’s role in arresting people involved in the insurrection. (As Vought told me, “Look at the F.B.I., look at the deep state. We have political prisoners in this country, regardless of what you think

about January 6th.”) The other hope in getting rid of Wray is that, without him, the Administration could use the agency to target its political opponents.

The person close to C.P.I. considered himself a denizen of the far-right wing of the Republican Party, yet some of the ideas under discussion among those working on Project 2025 genuinely scared him. One of them was what he described to me as “all this talk, still, about bombing Mexico and taking military action in Mexico.” This had apparently come up before, during the first Trump term, in conversations about curbing the country’s drug cartels. The President had been mollified but never dissuaded. According to Mike Pompeo, his former Secretary of State, Trump once asked, “How would we do if we went to war with Mexico?”

Trump’s former economic advisers Robert Lighthizer and Peter Navarro want Trump to impose tariffs of as much as ten per cent on foreign imports. Economists across the political spectrum have predicted that such a policy—which could trigger an international trade war, dramatically boosting inflation—would be catastrophic for the U.S. economy. “Lighthizer and Navarro are fucking clowns,” the person told me.

Those close to Trump are also anticipating large protests if he wins in November. His first term was essentially bookended by demonstrations, from the Women’s March and rallies against the Muslim ban to the mass movement that took to the streets after the murder of George Floyd, in the summer of 2020. Jeffrey Clark and others have been working on plans to impose a version of the Insurrection Act that would allow the President to dispatch troops to serve as a national police force. Invoking the act would allow Trump to arrest protesters, the person told me. Trump came close to doing this in the final months of his term, in response to the Black Lives Matter protests, but he was blocked by his Secretary of Defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

“Something under discussion is who they could actually appoint without Senate confirmation,” the person added. Schedule F, the executive order from October, 2020, that enabled the purge of career civil servants, was rescinded by the Biden Administration, but it would be reinstated by Trump. Presidents typically take their most decisive action in the first hundred days. The plan for Trump, I was told, was to set everything in motion “within hours of taking office.” This was what Trump had apparently meant when he told Sean Hannity, earlier this year, that he wouldn’t be a dictator, “except for Day One.”

The Trump campaign has tried to distance itself from the most radical aspects of Project 2025. There are no benefits—only political liabilities—to endorsing so many specifics. Trump’s supporters already know what he stands for, in a general sense. And there is the more delicate matter of the former President’s ego. “He wouldn’t want to be seen as taking guidance from any other human being,” the former senior White House official told me. “He doesn’t like to be seen as someone who doesn’t know everything already.” On July 5th, Trump wrote on Truth Social, “I know nothing about Project 2025. I have no idea who is behind it. I disagree with some of the things they’re saying and some of the things they’re saying are absolutely ridiculous and abysmal.” He said that he wished them luck.

His fortunes, though, were rising. The Presidential race was now his to lose. By the spring, he was steadily leading in national polls, with a larger edge in key battleground states. The Biden campaign had proposed two debates, with a format designed to control Trump’s pugilistic impulses: no studio audience and the microphones silenced after each answer, to prohibit interruptions. But during the first debate, on June 27th, Biden faltered. He stood rigidly at the podium, with a slack, vacant expression. His voice was weak and wavering, and he repeatedly trailed off mid-thought. The disastrous performance has since led an increasing number of Democrats to call for him to withdraw from the race. The following week, Trump was on the golf course with his son Barron and was caught on video summarizing the current electoral landscape. “I kicked that old broken-down pile of crap,” he said of Biden. “That means we have Kamala,” he went on. “I think she’s going to be better. She’s so bad. She’s so pathetic.”

In the first year of Biden’s Presidency, C.P.I. raised forty-five million dollars, more money than it had received in the previous four years combined. A single donor was responsible for twenty-five million dollars of that year’s haul: Mike Rydin, a seventy-five-year-old widower from Houston, who in 2021 made a fortune from the sale of his company, which developed software for the construction industry. Until then, he was a small-time Republican donor and a relative unknown in national political circles; in 2019, he contributed only about seven thousand dollars to the Trump campaign, according to the Daily Beast. But Rydin told me that he considered C.P.I.’s founder “the most honest man in America.”

While DeMint was in the Senate, he started a political-action committee, the Senate Conservatives Fund, to raise money for right-wing candidates who challenged Republican incumbents in Party primaries. “That was a cardinal sin,” the DeMint staffer

told me. “He primaried his colleagues.” Some of the candidates supported by the PAC—Lee, in Utah; Rand Paul, in Kentucky; and Marco Rubio, in Florida—defeated fellow-Republicans backed by Senate leadership, then won their general elections. But, in other races, DeMint’s intervention backfired. In Delaware, he championed the candidacy of Christine O’Donnell, a conservative activist whose campaign imploded after footage surfaced of her saying that she’d “dabbled into witchcraft.” DeMint was unbothered. “I’d rather have thirty Marco Rubios in the Senate than sixty Arlen Specters,” he once said, referring to the moderate Republican from Pennsylvania, who eventually switched parties.

DeMint’s crusade reminded Rydin of his own career—the years of financial struggles, the uncertainties, the skeptics. “I knew what it was like to be alone,” he said. “It’s tough to be alone, to fight battles alone.” When a representative from the Senate Conservatives Fund reached out to him, in 2009, Rydin agreed to donate a thousand dollars. “That was, like, the most money I’d ever donated to anything,” Rydin said. Afterward, he told me, “someone calls me and says, ‘Senator DeMint wants to talk to you.’ And I said, ‘A senator? Really?’ ”

Rydin is polite and unprepossessing, almost droll. In our conversations, he was guarded but firm in expressing his commitment to ending illegal immigration, cutting government spending, and getting foreign countries to deal with their own problems. Rydin admitted that when Trump, as President, threatened to impose tariffs on Mexico “it scared the hell out of me.” But, he added, “everything Trump did turned out wonderfully. I’m not going to second-guess him anymore.” In the end, Rydin’s attraction to extreme figures seemed more personal than ideological. In 2015, he met Mark Meadows after Meadows, then a congressman from North Carolina, attempted to oust the Republican Speaker of the House, John Boehner, a radical act for which Meadows was later described as “a legislative terrorist.” “He was absolutely terrified to do that,” Rydin told me. “He got no support whatsoever.”

Shortly after DeMint started C.P.I., in 2017, he and a colleague flew to Houston to meet with Rydin and other potential donors. Rydin had donated to Heritage while DeMint was there but stopped after his departure. (He has since resumed his contributions.) “It wouldn’t have bothered me if I never contributed to them again,” he said, “because they were firing Jim.” Now DeMint told him about his plans to create a conservative community in Washington, a place where members of Congress could confer before and after votes. “I’m on board,” Rydin told him. “You don’t have to say anything else.”

Rydin was ready to donate to C.P.I., but his wife, who avoided politics, was uncomfortable with him giving more than twenty-five thousand dollars. “To get her to twenty-five thousand dollars was a big deal,” he said. By the time she died, of cancer, in 2020, he’d increased his donation to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The next year, “I sold my company and had a lot of money,” he told me.

C.P.I. used part of Rydin’s twenty-five-million-dollar donation to buy, for seven million dollars, a lodge with eleven bedrooms on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, which it named Camp Rydin. The property has a shooting range and a horse stable. (“It’s rustic but luxurious,” the person close to C.P.I. told me.) To date, C.P.I. has held some two dozen trainings there for congressional staff and conservative activists, according to travel-disclosure forms filed with the government. Rydin has also donated to many of the groups in the C.P.I. network, including the Center for Renewing America, American Moment, and the American Accountability Foundation. In July, America First Legal sent out a preëlection fund-raising pitch: through August 15th, all donations up to two million dollars would be matched by “Houstonian patriot and generous AFL supporter Mike Rydin.”

As a nonprofit, C.P.I. is forbidden to engage in partisan spending or certain kinds of lobbying. Its network of associated organizations, however, has allowed it to do both of those things through a legal back door. America First Legal, like C.P.I., is a nonprofit. But it has a related entity called Citizens for Sanity, which can spend money on political advertising with minimal restrictions. In the last six months of 2022, Citizens for Sanity spent more than ninety million dollars on ads, including one that ran during the World Series. It laid the blame for crime, high inflation, and low wages on illegal immigration and warned viewers that Biden was leading the country toward “World War Three.” Other ads have decried “the woke left’s war on girls’ sports” and the “woke war on our children.” The group’s spending eclipsed that of both C.P.I. (which spent twenty-three million dollars in 2022) and America First Legal (which spent thirty-four million dollars). It’s impossible to know who donated the money, but the address listed on the tax documents for Citizens for Sanity is 300 Independence Avenue.

C.P.I.’s pitch to donors is also predicated on its close relationships with legislators in Washington. One member of the Freedom Caucus told me that House lawmakers were directly involved in C.P.I.’s fund-raising efforts. “When they made donor phone calls, they talked about how C.P.I. was the home of the Freedom Caucus,” the member told me. “The idea was ‘You

should give to us because we support the real conservatives.’ ” When House members are in Washington to take votes, C.P.I. often arranges donor events at 300 Independence Avenue. “The presence of the members was to help raise money, and they were requested to mingle with the donors,” the lawmaker said.

C.P.I.’s association with the Freedom Caucus raises questions about whether the organization can credibly claim to be a nonprofit that steers clear of actual lobbying. In January of 2023, members of the Freedom Caucus met at C.P.I.’s headquarters to strategize about their attempt to block Kevin McCarthy from becoming the House Speaker. Meadows joined and advised them on how to proceed; he was regarded as someone with expertise, having tried to oust Boehner in 2015. “It’s pretty extraordinary that Meadows was sitting there talking about how to deny McCarthy the Speakership and how to negotiate concessions,” the member told me. C.P.I. also exerts an unspoken power over lawmakers because of its ties to the House Freedom Fund, the caucus’s political-action committee, which is also registered at 300 Independence Avenue.

Since 2021, Rydin no longer appears to be C.P.I.’s biggest donor. His foundation gave the group \$1.5 million in 2022, but, according to C.P.I.’s tax filings, an unnamed donor contributed \$15.5 million that year. Among C.P.I.’s most recent donors are the Servant Foundation, a fund backed by David Green, the founder of Hobby Lobby; Donors Trust, a fund associated with Leonard Leo and the Koch family; the Bradley Impact Fund, an offshoot of a Wisconsin-based philanthropy where Cleta Mitchell serves as a board secretary; and the Ohio food-packing magnate Dave Frecka and his wife, Brenda, who have a conference room named after them at 300 Independence Avenue. “The previous dark-money political-influence operations tended to be run by more old-school billionaire, polluter, right-wing interests,” Sheldon Whitehouse, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, told me. “C.P.I. represents the MAGA move into this space.”

On a bright, warm day in May, I visited Saurabh Sharma, the twenty-six-year-old head of American Moment, which describes its mission as “identifying, educating, and credentialing” a new generation of conservative staffers. Dressed in a blazer and tie, with round glasses and brown bit loafers, he greeted me in front of a small door on Pennsylvania Avenue that was wedged between a Sweetgreen and a Dos Toros. A narrow staircase led to a small office suite that the group had rented from C.P.I.

Between February, 2022, and March, 2023, C.P.I. bought seven buildings and a parking lot along this stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue. It made the purchases through a web of more than a dozen limited-liability companies, taking out at least twenty-five million dollars in mortgages. What helps the group cover the monthly payments is the rent that it charges its network of affiliated nonprofits. Behind the buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue, C.P.I. plans to close off the back alley and create a nine-thousand-square-foot “campus” called Patriots’ Row. It already has a property next to the Senate; by expanding its footprint closer to the House, it hopes to insure that staffers from both chambers, as well as the lawmakers themselves, have places to congregate within walking distance of their daily business.

Sharma led me past a counter with a tap for cold brew and into a room filled with chairs and a lectern. He is originally from Texas, where he was the youngest-ever chairman of the state’s Young Conservatives association, and carries himself with the aplomb of someone twice his age. “No one else is as obsessed with finding young people and making them into extremely influential political actors within bureaucratic government life,” he told me. “No one cares as much about doing that as I do.”

Four years ago, Sharma stayed up late one night reading an essay by Senator J. D. Vance, a Republican from Ohio, who was then a venture capitalist and a best-selling author. The piece, titled “End the Globalization Gravy Train,” was a statement of principles for a branch of the conservative movement ascendant in the Trump era and known as the New Right: economic nationalism, foreign-policy isolationism, hostility to immigration. Sharma was struck by a portion of the essay in which Vance argued that personnel at every level of government in Washington were not up to the task of responding to the demands of the moment. It was something that Sharma had heard gripes about before, during a summer internship in Washington. For too long, he said on a recent podcast, government offices were staffed by “twenty-three-year-old shitheads” sent to D.C. by their parents to keep them “as far away from the family business as humanly possible.” He put it to me more soberly: “The personnel pipeline needed to be rebuilt from scratch. Who are the fifty twenty-year-olds we should be looking at? There needs to be a white-glove process by which they’re brought into the fold.”

In the winter of 2021, C.P.I. convened a meeting of its top donors in the ballroom of a Miami hotel. Sharma pitched the donors on his new venture, alongside Stephen Miller, Russell Vought, and Ben Carson, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development under Trump. “It was a very risky thing for them to do,” Sharma told me of C.P.I. “Most groups in Washington don’t want to share their donors. It shows a great deal of confidence on the part of C.P.I.” At the gathering, Sharma met Rydin, who immediately took to him. Later on, while Sharma was speaking to another donor, Rydin approached the pair. “Isn’t this guy so impressive?” Rydin said to the donor, pointing to Sharma. “Well, are you going to help him?”

Sharma considers C.P.I. a “fraternity” devoted to, in his telling, creating a new and lasting culture in Washington. “The right and its people are almost like sedimentary rock,” he said. “It’s like the Grand Canyon. You can see the layers in it. Who the President is in any given year defines what kind of people choose to get involved in center-right politics.” He ran through some history, starting with Barry Goldwater, in the nineteen-sixties, and ending with Trump. “President Trump getting elected brought in an entirely new generation of people,” he said. The problem was that most Republicans in Washington had initially detested the former President. As a result, Sharma said, “no one was interested in elevating a young kid that came to them and said, ‘I’d really like to get involved in politics because President Trump was right. We got lied into Iraq. We should shut down the border. And we’re getting sold out by China when it comes to trade.’ ”

American Moment, he went on, was correcting the “injustice” of the fact that, for the first few years of Trump’s term, the views of such young people were “artificially suppressed” in Washington. “The way that the Trump legacy will be immortal, the way that Trump himself will be immortal, is if there’s a corresponding generation of people that are drawn to politics based on his vision,” Sharma said. Some conservative ideologues tend to see Trump as a wild but ultimately necessary means to an end. In Sharma’s view, Trump is the “alpha and the omega of the conservative movement.” He told me, “The only reason these opportunities exist is because Trump ran and won. The only reason these opportunities exist today is because Trump hasn’t left the scene.”

Sharma had to leave to host a book party at C.P.I. headquarters, which was across the street, and we strolled over together. While we waited at a crosswalk, a young congressional staffer stopped to shake Sharma’s hand. A few other people were making their way to C.P.I.’s town house. At the party, there was a full bar and pulled-pork sandwiches. In a few days, American Moment would be hosting a Hawaiian-themed bash called the Lawless Lawfare Luau, where attendees would wear leis. “I don’t know a D.C. without C.P.I.,” Sharma told me. “But those who were around before say it was a wasteland.”



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