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The Destruction of Hillary Clinton
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A Note About the Author
that simply isn't seen as part of the job description any longer. Others, happily, are calling for the revival of old-style investigative journalism, and more and more are beginning to practice it. It's essential. For unless fictions and optical illusions like "Untrustworthy Hillary" and "Straight-shooter Trump" are deconstructed, they will continue to be recycled and reinforced—and their status, over time, transformed from pseudo-realities into fact.

Wait, forget "over time"; they have already been engraved as fact in the minds of millions of Americans.

5.

Damned Emails
Here's a shocker: Clinton didn't lie about “the damned emails.” Nor did she treat classified material in an “extremely careless” manner. The email “scandal,” like many previous investigations into the Clintons, was a whole lot of nothing blown to nuclear proportions by the GOP and helpfully served up in an endless stream of tasty, poisonous portions by the mainstream media. For weeks, we snacked on high-calorie accusations and insinuations—including some delivered personally by Vladimir Putin via WikiLeaks. And then, just as we appeared to be stuffed to the brim and our attention had turned to the Trumpish behavior that had shaken Michelle Obama (and thousands of other American women) to her core, we were presented with a flaming dessert, courtesy of James Comey.

Part One: A Scandal is Born

On October 22, 2015 Hillary Clinton made her final, triumphant appearance before the neverending Benghazi Committee. The hearings had been plodding on since September
2014, trying to pin responsibility on Clinton for the death of Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. But her day-long October interrogation should have ended it; it was an extraordinary event and a dazzling performance, in which Clinton, as Politico’s Edward Isaac Dovere describes her, “delivered tirelessly, knocking back the Republicans one by one” and “reminded people of everything they like about her: toughness, but also a calm, adult presence of someone you can actually see being president of the United States.”

Chairman Trey Gowdy, who had “been conducting the investigation like an oversealous prosecutor desperately trying to land a front-page conviction rather than a neutral judge of facts seeking to improve the security of our diplomatic core” was not to be defeated, however. For just as one investigation into Bill Clinton had led to another . . . and another . . . and another, the Benghazi investigators, asking for some emails, had struck an unexpected new fountain of perpetually flowing liquid gold for their purposes.

On March 2, 2015 The New York Times’s Michael Schmidt made it public for the first time: the Benghazi hearings had revealed that Clinton “exclusively used a personal email account to conduct government business as secretary of state.” “Hillary Clinton Used Personal Email Account at State Dept., Possibly Breaking Rules” read the headline. In the piece itself, Schmidt described Clinton’s “expansive use” of the private account as “alarming” and “a serious breach,” and noted that Clinton and her aides had also failed to retain her letters and emails as required by federal law.

“Breaking Rules” was, of course, a dog whistle for Clin-
made crystal clear in May 2016, when the conservative watchdog group Judicial Watch brought a lawsuit. “There is no question,” the Justice Department’s civil division attorneys wrote, “that former Secretary Clinton had authority to delete personal emails without agency supervision—she appropriately could have done so even if she were working on a government server.”

But this was Hillary Clinton, after all, queen of political duplicity. Who knows what those deleted private emails were “shielding”? On March 3, Schmidt followed up his March 2 story, describing Clinton as engaging in a practice that “protected a significant amount of her correspondence from the eyes of investigators and the public.” He quoted Jeff Bechdel, spokesperson for America Rising, a conservative PAC that produces opposition research on Democratic Party members:

Unfortunately, Clinton’s own political calculation and desire for secrecy, as evidenced by her exclusive use of personal email accounts while at State, is preventing an open process and full, fair review of her time there.

Bechdel was a GOP spokesperson. There was no “evidence” tying Clinton’s use of a personal email to “political calculation” or a “desire for secrecy.” This was clearly a narrative that reporter Schmidt felt no obligation to correct. Indeed, in his own editorializing the day before, he had said much the same thing, only using more cautious journalistic euphemisms, like “echoes” instead of “as evidenced”:

The revelation about the private email account echoes longstanding criticisms directed at both the former sec-

retary and her husband, former President Bill Clinton, for a lack of transparency and inclination toward secrecy.

“Echoes” is not synonymous with “as evidenced by”—if you are taking the SATs. But for the casual reader, skimming the story on a commuter train or while eating breakfast, what undoubtedly stood out were the phrases “lack of transparency” and “inclination toward secrecy.” They were such familiar ingredients in the coverage of “The Clintons”—and quickly became headlined in every story. Within a week, Clinton’s emails had become an emerging “scandal” that sidelined all her attempts to talk about policy. The coverage was full of rhetorical flourishes that threw shade on the Clintons’ “past”—the details of which few readers/viewers, particularly if they were young, were actually familiar with: “Can she reinvent herself or will she be forever dogged by how she has approached controversies in the past?” “Even friendly Democrats wondered whether she and her team were capable of turning over a new leaf.” Clinton, struggling to figure out how to explain the complexities of what we now know was an archaic, clumsy, contradictory system of record keeping, was chastised for being slow to answer the charges. She had “allowed the controversy to smolder for days.” Would she now finally “show contrition?”

Contrition was not something that Clinton owed anyone, as she hadn’t done anything wrong. But Representative Trey Gowdy, the South Carolina Republican who was chairing the House panel investigating the attack on the U.S. embassy in Benghazi, felt otherwise. Salivating over this fresh opportunity to bring Clinton down, he said he planned to haul the former secretary of state in for hearings “at least twice.”
Gowdy also said he saw “no choice” but for Clinton to hand her server to an independent arbiter who would sort through her emails and decide which of them should be made public. “Secretary Clinton alone created this predicament, but she alone does not get to determine its outcome,” he said.

Later the same day, CNN’s John King ran a piece called “Hillary Clinton’s email scandal is exactly what you can expect from her presidential campaign”:

Secrecy. Shielding documents. Accusations of arrogance and hypocrisy. Debates about the letter and the spirit of the rules. A public defense—but also jitters and disbelief—from fellow Democrats. Legitimate criticism along with some eye-rolling conspiracy theories from Republicans. We have seen this movie before . . .

What is past is prologue.

Yes, if you are determined to tell the story that way.

Part Two: Clinton Becomes a “Criminal”
(Courtesy of The New York Times)

On July 23, 2015, the year before the election, the Times ran a story entitled “Criminal Inquiry Sought in Hillary Clinton’s Use of Email.” It began with the lede: “Two inspector generals have asked the Justice Department to open a criminal investigation into whether Hillary Clinton mishandled sensitive government information on a private email account she used as Secretary of State, senior government officials said Thursday.”

The Facts: As Representative Elijah E. Cummings—Ranking Member of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform—and the Justice Department immediately confirmed, there was no “criminal inquiry” at all, but rather a review under the Freedom of Information Act of whether some emails not previously marked “classified” ought to have been. This had nothing to do with Clinton herself, and certainly didn’t constitute a “criminal referral.”

The Times later changed the headline and the lede, but insisted the story didn’t require an explicit correction, allowing those who had seen the original headline—including early morning news-show pundits—a full day to run with the misguided impression that Clinton was under criminal investigation. Ultimately, the Times printed a correction, admitting that their story had “misstated the nature of the referral to the Justice Department regarding Hillary Clinton’s personal email account when she was Secretary of State. The referral addressed the potential compromise of classified information in connection with that personal email account. It did not specifically request an investigation into Mrs. Clinton.”

Barely anyone noticed the correction. It’s the way these things tend to work. Headlines make the front page; retractions are buried. The consequences of this asymmetry can be devastating.

Part 3: Clinton Is Vindicated, but No One Knows It

Skip ahead to the presidential campaign. While Trump was given a free ride by the mainstream media and Sanders’s “momentum” was the big narrative about his campaign, the
"email scandal" became the dominant Clinton story of the year that followed.

Although no evidence existed that she was hiding anything, Hillary continued to be criticized for "not coming clean." She maintained, as she had at the February 2016 presidential debate, that she "never sent or received any classified material" and, in a press conference in May, that regarding the private server, "What I had done was allowed, it was above board." But reporters badgered her for more. They wanted contrition, an apology for her use of a private server—and ultimately, Clinton gave it, in a September 8 interview with David Muir on ABC:

In retrospect, certainly, as I look back on it now, even though it was allowed, I should've used two accounts. One for personal, one for work-related emails. That was a mistake. I'm sorry about that. I take responsibility.

The next day she repeated that she did not "send or receive classified material on the private account." USA Today described the apology as an "about-face."

On May 26, however, Clinton was vindicated when the State Department inspector general released its eighty-three page evaluation of email management. Its major criticism, as Rachel Maddow reported—and visually demonstrated with a huge, unwieldy stack of paper—was reserved for the "archaic archiving system" that Clinton had to work with: an "abyssal system of record-keeping" in which the only approved method for archiving emails was by printing and boxing each one that was received or sent. No indexing or electronic storage, just physical "filing" of thousands and thousands of pages in box after box of printed emails.

Representative Cummings issued the following statement in response to the report:

The Inspector General confirmed what we have known all along—that Secretary Clinton followed the practice of her predecessor when she used a personal email account. While Secretary Clinton preserved and returned tens of thousands of pages of her emails to the Department for public release, Secretary Powell returned none. Republicans need to stop wasting taxpayer dollars singling out Secretary Clinton just because she is running for President. If Republicans really care about transparency, they will work constructively with Democrats to focus on fixing what this report shows are longstanding, systemic flaws in the State Department's recordkeeping practices for decades.

Cummings's press release was substantiated by a piece in Forbes magazine, which concluded, that as regards Clinton's handling of emails, the evaluation "does not add any new serious charges or adverse facts" about Clinton but rather retraces a "dreary history of records and archival policy" involving "general problems" with printing and filing emails in a retrievable way that should not be "pinned" on Clinton. The piece concludes: "A report that says so little new against Clinton, amounts to a vindication."

But if Clinton was "vindicated" by the report, you certainly couldn't tell from the headlines and television tickers:

"Clinton's Violation of State Department Email Rules" (ticker on MSNBC)

"State Department Report Slams Clinton's Email Use" (CNN)
“State Dept. inspector general report sharply criticizes Clinton’s email practices” (Washington Post)


Part 4: James Comey’s Abuse of Power, act I

On July 5, 2016, James Comey, director of the FBI, appeared on television to make an important, albeit befuddling, announcement: “Although we did not find clear evidence that Secretary Clinton or her colleagues intended to violate laws governing the handling of the classified information, there is evidence that they were extremely careless in their handling of very sensitive, highly classified information.” Though he had cleared Clinton of all criminal charges, he had also ventured way beyond protocol in publicly criticizing Clinton and the State Department for their handling of classified emails, and recklessly speculating that her email system “could have been” hacked. The FBI’s proper role is to conduct investigations into charges, which are then either dismissed or presented to and adjudicated by a judge or jury, not to publicly editorialize about conclusions. Comey’s announcement was thus a stunning violation of Justice Department practice, which is to notify the public when an investigation is concluded, inform us of whether or not charges are brought, and then quietly leave the stage.

Not only did Comey abuse his power by chastising the behavior of a defendant who had been cleared of criminal charges, but he also left the listening public with the impression of a mixed verdict (which it was not; Clinton was cleared), and gave the GOP a heap of red meat to throw to the hungry media.

Besides the charge of “extreme carelessness,” Comey also suggested that Clinton had lied, that—contrary to her statements to the public—she had received 110 classified emails (out of 30,000 the FBI had recovered). Clinton, of course, had claimed on television that she had neither received nor sent any classified emails on her private server. But she also clarified that she had meant “emails marked as classified.” The clarification is crucial, because it’s through a system of markings that the state department operates. The appropriate “header,” as Ellen Tauscher, who served as an undersecretary in the State Department until 2012, corroborated, is required of all classified documents.

Of course, it’s always possible for one person (or agency) to deem something “classified” and another person (or agency) to disagree. Indeed, that often happens, as documents travel from agency to agency and their contents get reinterpreted. Classification is a moving machine, which stopped at Clinton’s desk marked in a particular way. She relied on those markings; how else could she—or anyone else in her position—operate?

FBI director James Comey, however, mentioned neither this nor the “archaic system” when he claimed that Clinton, contrary to her statements to the public, had received 110 classified emails. Classified? None of these emails had the required headers—so how was Clinton to know? Comey dismissed that as a triviality, claiming that the emails contained “subject matter” that “any reasonable person should have known… had no place in an unclassified system.”

The media gave about five minutes to the fact that Clinton was cleared of any criminal activity in her handling of emails. The far hotter story was her “carelessness”—and, of course,
the implication (not stated by Comey) that she had “lied to the public.” Without allowing themselves a moment to examine Comey’s words with care or to question his reckless breach of protocol, commentators immediately began to weave his report into their favored narrative of Clintonian “untrustworthiness.”

“It’s a complete political indictment of her conduct,” declared MSNBC journalist Kristen Welker. “A direct disputation of the stories she’s been telling,” added political commentator Chris Cillizza. It demonstrated that “trust and honesty continue to dog the Clinton campaign” (Chuck Todd). Claiming that Comey had “completely disputed Hillary’s claims,” Andrea Mitchell predicted “grave political problems” for Clinton.

By the time Joe Scarborough, Mika Brzezinski, and Nicole Wallace got in on the act on Morning Joe, it had predictably become a tale of bald-faced deception on Clinton’s part. The show began with artfully arranged side-by-side clips contrasting Clinton’s statements with Comey’s “assessments.” Guests who tried to caution against hurried conclusions, like Steve Rattner and Howard Dean, were interrupted and talked over. Nothing was allowed to interfere with the “untrustworthy Clinton” thread.

Part 5: Comey Is Forced to Retract
His Criticism, but the Press
Doesn’t Notice

On July 7, 2016 House Republicans, unhappy with Comey’s failure to indict Clinton, had asked him to answer questions from them, to which he agreed. Grilling him, they got little more than a slight elaboration of the initial “extremely careless” assessment:

Certainly she should have known not to send classified information. As I said, that’s the definition of negligent. I think she was extremely careless. I think she was negligent. That I could establish. What we can’t establish is that she acted with the necessary criminal intent.

But when Democrats took over the questioning, things got rockier for Comey. First, Elijah Cummings pressed Comey to restate, more explicitly, that only 3 of those 110 emails had any kind of markings on them at all which would have alerted the recipient to their classified status. Those three, moreover, were marked (mistakenly, as it later turned out) only “internally,” with tiny letter symbols pertaining to specific sentences within the emails.

Then, Congressman Matt Cartwright forced Comey to admit that the emails with the internal c’s were not properly marked according to the State Department Manual, and that his previous comment that “any reasonable person” would have known the emails were classified was implausible, if not a out-and-out falsehood. To judge unheaded emails as classified was in fact a standard that was unreasonable to apply. To the contrary, it would be a “reasonable inference” that the three documents missing the header were not classified.

Holding the manual in his hand, Cartwright calmly got right to the point:

MATT CARTWRIGHT: You were asked about markings on a few documents, I have the manual here, marking national classified security information. And I don’t think you were given a full chance to talk about those three documents with the little c’s on them. Were they properly documented? Were they properly marked according to the manual?
JAMES COMEY: No.

MATT CARTWRIGHT: According to the manual, and I ask unanimous consent to enter this into the record, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN: Without objection so ordered.

CARTWRIGHT: According to the manual, if you’re going to classify something, there has to be a header on the document? Right?

COMEY: Correct.

CARTWRIGHT: Was there a header on the three documents that we’ve discussed today that had the little c in the text someplace?

COMEY: No. There were three e-mails, the c was in the body, in the text, but there was no header on the email or in the text.

CARTWRIGHT: So if Secretary Clinton really were an expert about what’s classified and what’s not classified and we’re following the manual, the absence of a header would tell her immediately that those three documents were not classified. Am I correct in that?

COMEY: That would be a reasonable inference.

Comey’s admission exonerated Hillary not only from any “carelessness” or “negligence,” but also from the charge of lying about “not sending or receiving any classified emails.” It would have been entirely “reasonable” for her to conclude that the emails not appropriately marked were not classified—exactly as she had been saying for months.

If you were watching the hearing it was a revelatory moment. But how many viewers caught the exchange? Audiences at my talks, when I ran video clips of Cummings’s and Cartwright’s questioning, were shocked and amazed.

As for me, the hearing solidified my suspicion that Comey’s unprecedented interference was indeed politically motivated (or pressured). For, surely at this point, Comey ought to have held a full-blown press conference apologizing for his inaccurate assessment of Clinton’s handling of classified material. Instead, he was silent, while the media incessantly hammered away at Clinton’s “carelessness” and “lies” about her emails. It was a recklessly disseminated narrative with no basis in fact. Yet at the time his mischaracterization was disclosed, Comey offered no public correction or retraction of his previous commentary, which was left to do its political dirty work, unchallenged by the facts. Thus for any viewers relying on TV “news”—MSNBC as well as Fox—these exonerating exchanges never happened, because their importance was never turned into “breaking news” or a “headline” story.

In fact, the media dug its heels in even further on the “lying Clinton” issue. On August 1, the Washington Post gave Clinton four “Pinocchios” for trying to correct Chris Wallace in a Fox News Sunday interview on July 31. Wallace had said, inaccurately, that “FBI director James Comey, in the congressional hearing, said none of those things that you told the American public were true.” Wallace was either uninformed or lying, for Comey had said nothing of the sort. Rather, he said that he wasn’t “qualified to answer” the question of “whether Clinton had lied to the public.” What he did feel qualified to answer was whether her answers to the FBI were truthful, and on that issue he had replied that “we have no basis to conclude that she lied.”

What did Clinton reply that got her pantsuit set on fire? Instead of quoting Comey’s lawyerly “no basis to conclude that she lied,” she answered in terms ordinary people use. She said Comey had said, “her answers were truthful.” She then went
on to connect the dots between her FBI testimony and what she had said to the public, describing them as “consistent” with each other. Complicated, perhaps. Requiring a bit of thought on the part of listeners, yes. But a lie? Give us a break.

Yet the saga of “Lying Hillary and her emails” went on and on, perpetuated not only in the headlines but by the polls.

For example, take the July Washington Post-ABC News poll results showing that 56 percent of respondents felt the FBI was wrong in not charging Clinton, a result that had the GOP falling over itself with glee. Comey’s irresponsible comments on Clinton’s “carelessness,” as Andrea Mitchell predicted, did cause big trouble for Clinton. But the poll didn’t simply “measure” this, it perpetuated it. Here’s how the survey phrased the question, repeating in it the same inappropriate and leading (and as it turns out, inaccurate) “editorializing” that Comey indulged in:

As you may have heard, FBI Director James Comey has recommended not charging Hillary Clinton with a crime for her use of personal email while Secretary of State, saying she did not have any criminal intent. He also said Clinton was “extremely careless” in her handling of classified information in her personal email. Do you approve or disapprove of Comey’s recommendation that Clinton should not be charged with a crime?

Consider, too, that even after Comey’s exoneration, polling showed that 56 percent of Americans believed Clinton had indeed broken the law by relying on a personal email address, “with another 36 percent piling on to say the episode showed ‘bad judgment’ albeit not criminality.” Those numbers are ghastly, considering—as demonstrated in this chap-

ter—that she had in fact broken no laws or behaved carelessly, but they are unsurprising, given the overwhelming negative attention that network and cable news has paid to Clinton’s emails—more airtime, as Matthew Yglesias reports, than to all policy issues combined. During the entire general election campaign, from June 7 to November 8, Clinton only led over Trump in quantity of media coverage four times: once was when she had pneumonia, once was during the DNC, and the other two were during and right after James Comey’s announcements.

Thus, “a story that was at best of modest significance came to dominate the U.S. presidential election,” creating a misleading impression of Clinton’s character and competence and vastly overshadowing coverage of both her accomplishments and her policy proposals. Is it any wonder that so many people had a totally false impression of what a Clinton presidency would be like? Between Sanders labeling Clinton as a Wall Street lackey and the GOP obsession with her emails—both of which were lavishly covered by the mass media—the Clinton campaign was defined by negative sound bites. It wasn’t the case that she had “no message”; she wasn’t given the space to deliver it, as the email “scandal” swamped the media.
7.

Coup d'État
The “Other” Email Scandal

On October 4, right before the Access Hollywood tapes broke, an article appeared in The Washington Post, describing the disappointment of Roger Stone and other backers of Donald Trump that the anti-secrecy organization WikiLeaks had not yet produced the “October surprise” it had been promising. “For weeks,” the article read, the Trump contingent had “hyped the tantalizing possibility” that a set of documents would be released that would “doom Hillary Clinton’s chances in November.”

In July, WikiLeaks had stirred up internal trouble among the Democrats, renewing the anger of Bernie supporters by releasing emails containing snipes against Sanders by members of the DNC. Bernie himself didn’t find the comments shocking. “If they went into our emails,” he said, “I’m sure there would be statements that would be less than flattering about, you know, the Clinton staff. That’s what happens in campaigns.” But his supporters weren’t as sanguine, and complained loudly that the emails confirmed their suspicions that the primary had been “rigged.”

The promised October leaks, whose origin Julian Assange
would not reveal, were touted to be “historic,” and Texas radio host Alex Jones pronounced that “the Clintons will be devastated.” Assange recommended patience; he promised to reveal documents every week for the following ten weeks, and said that “some will have a direct bearing on the U.S. election.”

We now know, thanks to a fourteen-page U.S. intelligence finding released on January 6, 2017—a joint product of the CIA, FBI, and National Security Agency—that the leaks were part of an intelligence operation personally ordered by Vladimir Putin with the purpose of “denying Hillary Clinton the presidency” and “installing Donald Trump in the Oval Office.” Putin had held a grudge against Clinton since 2011, the report stated, blaming her for inciting mass protests against his regime. As described by The New York Times, who devoted a massively headlined first page to the news, the “classified, damning report,” “a virtually unheard-of, real-time revelation by the American intelligence agencies that undermined the legitimacy of the president who is about to direct them—made the case that Mr. Trump was the favored candidate of Mr. Putin,” whose efforts to “undermine [Clinton’s] future presidency” intensified when she appeared more likely to win the election. In addition to the email drip, Russian intelligence also used state-funded broadcasts, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media trolls to spread false information “discrediting Secretary Clinton and publicly contrasting her unfavorably to [Trump].”

How destructive to Clinton were the leaks? The report, unsurprisingly, was unable to officially make an assessment of that, as it would require sophisticated multifactorial analysis of events, polls, and public opinion leading up to the election to determine. Trump, of course, insists that they had absolutely no effect on the election results, and most pundits have seemed happy to go along with that conclusion. (Trump also described the focus on the hacks as a “witch hunt” conducted against him—pretty ironic, considering the hacks themselves were part of a witch hunt aimed at the Clintons. Common sense, however, leads in a different direction than the “no effect” conclusion. If the leaks were so innocuous, why then did Trump’s campaign and GOP-friendly media invest so much in disseminating the information contained in them? And how to explain why the right-wing media had initially bragged about how “devastating” they were going to be? Were they just teasing? Or did they know more than they revealed at the time?

On this, the “middle-of-the-road” news stations like CNN shy away from what they fear might be seen as partisan, speculative analysis (although they actually engage in it all the time). But I don’t have the same anxiety—and I encourage readers of this book to consider the absurdity of imagining that a concerted Russian campaign of anti-Clinton propaganda—especially when put in the context of the other anti-Clinton tactics and atmospherics described in this book—had no effect on the outcome of the election. By themselves, it’s unlikely that the leaks were a deciding factor. But the leaks never operated “by themselves.” For one thing, being dropped like fresh chum (as Gabriel Debenedetti put it) in the media water regularly, they prevented other news from grabbing reporters’ attention. And then, too, their content—although relatively insignificant—was well employed to discredit Hillary at every turn, contributing to the perfect storm of Hillary hate (or at the very least, mistrust) that helped carry Trump to the White House.

Bernie Sanders’s fans, for example, who regarded
WikiLeaks as part of the “left,” had, as I’ve mentioned, seized on email evidence that the DNC had favored Clinton and “rigged” the primary, diluting whatever enthusiasm for Clinton had been developing among them—and in many cases, solidifying their determination to stay away from the polls, a failure of turnout that Nate Silver has calculated was deadly to Clinton’s chances of winning. The right probably didn’t need to be convinced, but nonetheless gobbled up and publicized any new examples of Clinton’s “duplicit”—such as when leaked emails revealed comments in which she had defended the notion that one’s public position often must diverge from one’s private ideas. (I found this a particularly unfair attack. The fact is, if all of us, all the time, publicly expressed what we are privately thinking, there would be few friends or colleagues left standing.

Arguably most destructive, though, because of the timing, were the leaks about the Clinton Foundation. The suspect items consisted almost entirely of emails in which Chelsea Clinton expressed concerns that large donations given during the time Hillary was secretary of state might be seen as involving “pay for play”—favoritism for those governments and businesses who were big benefactors. There was no evidence of such “pay for play” in the emails, just concerns about “optics.” When the emails were leaked, however, the Foundation was already a right-wing hot button because of the publication, in May 2015, of Clinton Cash, written by Peter Schweizer, Breitbart editor at large and president of the Government Accountability Institute (co-founded by Steve Bannon, who was Trump’s campaign manager and is now his right-hand man). Clinton Cash was full of rhetorical speculation but no evidence. After sixteen months of news investigations into the Foundation, nothing nefarious had been unearthed.

Lack of evidence, however, has never dampened the enthusiasm of Clinton’s enemies, among whom the book became a kind of contemporary cult classic. Most dangerously, Clinton Cash provided grist for the mill of a “rogue,” viciously anti-Clinton New York faction within the FBI, who made the investigation into the foundation “very high priority,” despite skepticism from FBI headquarters and superiors at the Justice Department. The rogue agents used Clinton Cash (in author Schweizer’s own words) as a “road map” for their investigations, while the leaked emails brought a fresh wave of suspicion about the Clinton Foundation to the forefront of public attention. The Trump campaign, Fox News, Morning Joe, and others declared outrage over “blurred lines between the Clinton Foundation and the family’s business interests.” (Trump should talk!) Even a responsible academic like Princeton’s Eddie Glaude, without a shred of evidence beyond “bad optics,” fulminated on Morning Joe about Clinton’s serious “moral and ethical deficit.”

Note well the timing of all this. On October 17, in the wake of the Access Hollywood tapes and Michelle Obama’s gripping speech, Nate Silver’s “election update” reported that with three weeks to go, Hillary Clinton had a “significant lead” of 6–7 points and an 86 percent chance of winning the election.

On October 27, the headlines exploded with news of the WikiLeaks emails concerning the Clinton Foundation. Someone was clearly watching—Putin or Assange—and knew exactly what he was doing.
James Comey’s Abuse of Power, act 2

James Comey, for reasons that are still not clear, had already gone way beyond FBI protocol, and according to many committed a gross abuse of his own power, when, in early July, he had described Clinton’s handling of emails as “careless.”

He also revealed a shifting set of scruples about what the public has a right to know, displaying no obligation to publicly correct the record on Clinton’s “carelessness” when Elijah Cummings and Matt Cartwright pressed him to admit that Clinton had not acted carelessly (and by implication, not lied) in treating unmarked emails as unclassified.

Yet, on October 28 he compounded his earlier actions and ignored the Justice Department’s guidelines barring the release of information about ongoing investigations—or even returning indictments—involving individuals running for office in close proximity (within sixty days) to an election, and sent a letter to Congress saying that “in connection with an unrelated case, the FBI has learned of the existence of emails that appear to be pertinent to the investigation.” These emails, discovered on the laptop of Anthony Weiner, former congressman and husband of Clinton’s aide and confidant Huma Abedin, needed to be reviewed to “determine whether they contained classified information, as well as to assess their importance to the investigation.”

Comey’s motives for this extraordinary additional breach of protocol remain unclear. E. J. Dionne, in The Washington Post, suggests that he was intimidated by pressure from congressional Republicans who’d been furious about his earlier exoneration of Clinton, or perhaps (or also) by factions within the FBI who had been “complaining privately that Comey should have tried harder to make a case” against Clinton. Comey’s subordinates anonymously told reporters that felt felt obligated to “update Congress” on his earlier (equally irregular) report.

Whatever Comey’s motives, the slime factor went beyond his actions. As Rudy Giuliani’s undisciplined blabbing revealed, Trump campaign officials actually knew Comey’s letter to Congress was coming beforehand, and made the most of it: “I think [Trump’s] got a surprise or two that you’re going to hear about in the next few days… a couple of things that should turn this around,” Giuliani told Fox the day before Comey’s letter to Congress surfaced; he also couldn’t resist bragging that he had insider knowledge of “a kind of revolution going on inside the FBI” springing from tensions between those who supported Comey’s legal exoneration of Clinton and those—the same New York faction for whom Clinton Cash was a bible—who were out for more blood. As E. J. Dionne had suggested, it’s likely that Comey’s hand was forced by this faction, either in collusion with Giuliani or simply out of their own hatred for Clinton. What is clear, though—unless Giuliani was just making the whole thing up, and why should he have?—is that, as Stevenbn finefrook in Alternet, there was “a cadre of Hillary-hating agents that pushed the Bureau to interfere in the 2016 election in a manner that can only be described as an attempted coup.”

Does that language sound too conspiratorial to you? Before the campaign I might have thought so, but the confluence, in the weeks before the election, of “a disastrous series of unfortunate events” for Hillary suggests that talk of a “coup,” although somewhat metaphorical, is not an exaggeration. For although these events were not orchestrated by one evil genius or agency, they may as well have been.
Consider, once again, the timing:

It’s eleven days before the election, Clinton has three successful debates behind her, Trump’s nasty behavior with women is on garish display, and the polls are looking really good for Hillary. Then, “FBI says emails found in Anthony Weiner’s sexting scandal may have links to Clinton inquiry” (the headline in the Los Angeles Times).

“May have links” is broad and vacuous; in fact, at the time of the announcement, all that the FBI could report was the “appearance” of “pertinence.” (They hadn’t even gotten a warrant as yet to determine the content of the emails, and could not “predict how long it will take us to complete this additional work.”) “Sexting scandal” was irrelevant (“Weiner’s emails” would have been sufficient), but did a great job of reminding readers of the sleaze factor among the Clinton men. Ironically, Trump had just been accused of sexual assault by twelve different women—and until Comey’s announcement, it was looking like it might sink him. But now, the damned emails were front and center again, and both the GOP and the media treated the news as explosive. MSNBC’s Kristen Welker declared that the “full enormity” of this new information could “up-end the entire election.” And Donald Trump, at the opening of a campaign rally in New Hampshire, made the most of Comey’s announcement: “Hillary Clinton’s corruption is on a scale we have never seen before. We must not let her take her criminal scheme into the Oval Office.” Referring to Comey’s original exoneration, he applauded the FBI for revisiting the case: “This was a grave miscarriage of justice that the American people fully understood. Perhaps finally justice will be done.”

The FBI’s conclusion was not what Trump intimated it

would be. As Clinton’s campaign had suspected was the case, the emails were revealed to be duplicates of those already scrutinized and found entirely innocent by the FBI.

By then, however, the election was just two days away, and the damage was done.
Epilogue

How harmful to Clinton was the second Comey intervention? Common sense alone suggests that the revival of "the email scandal," which had led so many Americans to see Clinton as untrustworthy and a liar, would have had a significant effect. Before the "new" email investigation was announced, the national consciousness was awash with revulsion and condemnation of Trump over the Access Hollywood tapes and the allegations that followed. After Comey's letter? For all intents and purposes it was as though the Access Hollywood tapes had never happened, and the twelve women alleging abuse had never come forward. "Breaking News" of "new email revelations" swept all that away.

Since the inauguration, however, things have changed. With Trump in the White House, all hope of a "pivot" is gone, and we now know that the man we elected is just what he seemed to be, and worse: an inveterate liar and authoritarian narcissist who appears to take what few orders he obeys not from constitutional constraints on his authority, but from right-wing ideologues like Steve Bannon and the interests of big business. In November, after the election, we were all instructed to have an "open mind" and "give him a chance." But the abusive tweets never stopped and the bald-
faced lies—about the size of the crowds at his inauguration, the three million "fraudulent" votes for Clinton, the failure of the "dishonest" press to cover terrorist attacks—have become daily fare. At the same time, we've found out that candidate Trump didn't lie about the things many of us most feared: in his first few weeks he ordered frantic, if clumsy, assaults on Obamacare, environmental and consumer protection, reproductive rights, and as of this writing, is attempting to put into effect the ban on Muslim immigration he promised throughout his campaign.

In the face of what seems to be a full-scale Trumpian attack on democracy, the rule of law, and the authority of fact, that Clinton was ever seen by any liberal or left-leaning voters as "the lesser of two evils" is painfully surreal, and those polls that showed that people found Trump more "trustworthy" now seem a betrayal of reason, evidence of just how deeply we were conned—not only by Trump but by the popular narratives concocted by the GOP and perpetuated by the media.

The GOP and news commentators alike cried "sore loser" when the Clinton campaign claimed Comey's interference had cost them the election. We now know, however, that the Clinton campaign's interpretation is highly likely to be correct. The polls, we were often told, simply got it wrong in predicting Clinton would be the winner. As Vox points out, however, "much of what pundits are describing as error . . . might better be described as the 'Comey effect.'" For very few of those polls were taken after Comey "re-opened" the investigation, which also happened to coincide with the final stretch of days when an "unusually large number of undecided voters" were making up their minds. Many of those late-deciding voters were likely to have had lingering reservations about Clinton (otherwise, why were they undecided?), but we know from earlier polls that such reservations were almost always based on mistrust, issuing largely from the faux "email scandal"—which had just been revived by James Comey.

Comparison of absentee votes and votes on Election Day show evidence of a late surge toward Trump. Bolstering the "Comey effect" hypothesis, too, is the fact that the national polls show indisputable evidence that Clinton's margin over Trump fell swiftly and steeply directly after the Comey letter—and never recovered. By November 3, Clinton's lead in the national polls was evaporating, and Trump had several plausible electoral map routes to victory.

That "Comey was a massive blow to Clinton at a pivotal moment in the election" seems beyond doubt. But if this book has argued anything at all, it's that Hillary's loss wasn't "just" the result of Comey's interference, or "just" the result of Putin's hacks, or GOP witch hunts, or fake news, or right-wing Hillary hate books. Her defeat isn't "just" attributable to "sexism" or "just" the fault of the media. It wasn't "just" caused by the "Sanders effect," which splintered democratic unity by generation. The destruction of Hillary Clinton's candidacy—and our hope of defeating Donald Trump—was the

53 Comey's duplicity concerning what the public should and shouldn't be told has finally begun to be exposed. More and more evidence has come to light that an FBI investigation into Trump campaign connections with Russia has indeed been underway for some time. Yet, in a recent Senate hearing, Comey refused to say whether or not there was such an investigation, citing the protocol of not commenting on investigations in an open forum! Maine's Angus King (an independent) was having none of it. "The irony of your making that statement, I cannot avoid," he said. Adam Schiff, top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, later told ABC News: "I think there's been a profound question raised as to whether Director Comey is dealing in an even-handed manner with the investigation of the Clinton emails and any investigation that may or may not be happening with respect to the Trump campaign."
result of all of these. One on top of the other, overlapping, mutually reinforcing, a massive pile-on of open assaults, secret strategies, unconscious biases, and blundering media business as usual simply proved too much. Even so, Hillary Clinton won nearly three million more votes than Trump. As to those states she lost: she didn’t “fail” to deliver, as it’s now often described. I would say instead that she almost made it, despite a daily barrage of character attacks, lies, and distortions.

When I began this epilogue, it was the day after Donald Trump’s inauguration, and millions of women, men, and children were gathering around the world to protest his policies. “Where was all this energy before the election?” one newscaster asked. Undoubtedly, many of the protestors had voted for Hillary Clinton. But the newscaster has a point. If the same coalition of anti-Trump forces, united not by a single issue or a single preferred candidate, had put their hearts and minds together with the aim of defeating him, it surely would have been accomplished. As things actually went, however, fear of a Trump presidency was not motivation enough to generate mass enthusiasm for the one action that was required to defeat him: electing Hillary Clinton.

Many people, to be sure, simply couldn’t wrap their minds around the possibility that Trump could actually win, and didn’t vote for Hillary, thinking she had it sewn up—as the pre-Comey polls had predicted. But others didn’t want to vote for Hillary and couldn’t bring themselves to, because they had been schooled in and accepted a false picture of who she is. We’ve seen, throughout this book, how and by whom that false picture was created—and how it was greatly enhanced by the (seemingly non-partisan) mainstream media, who served as a conveyor belt and mass dis-

seminator of negative narratives and imagery about Hillary.

The forces working against Clinton, then, were multiple and determined—and as it turned out, as effective as any true conspiracy in creating a critical mass of voters to derail her campaign. Who belonged to that mass? Of course, there were the “natural” Trump lovers, the racists and xenophobes who were with him from the beginning. There were the faithful Republicans who wouldn’t vote for a Democrat under any circumstances. And there were those who wouldn’t vote for a woman—any woman—no matter how qualified or experienced she was. Trump would have gotten all those votes in any case.

The voters I have in mind are different. They belong, mostly, to the almost five million Obama voters who either didn’t vote at all, voted third party, or may even have voted for Trump: The white, middle-class, suburban women who wanted to distance themselves from the unscrupulous, cold, “elitist” politician who was definitely not their kind of woman. The rust belt men who believed she was the “corporate whore” who had proposed putting coal miners out of business (rather than—as was actually the case—an honest candidate describing an economic reality that had to be confronted by the government whose responsibility it was to find other means of employment for them). The Sanders fans who came to see Hillary as barely better than Trump, and who just couldn’t rouse themselves to campaign for her (or for too many, to vote for her). The 46 percent of black voters under the age of thirty who did not vote, who may or may not have been Sanders supporters but who often, when asked why they didn’t intend on voting for Hillary, recited the Sanders caricature.
The many hardworking, stressed, perfectly decent folks with little spare time to research the facts, who put their trust in the media to tell them what was important, what was true, what to believe, and who came to believe that Hillary Clinton was too “untrustworthy” to be our president. The man I met at the grocery store who crossed Hillary off his list when she seemed to be describing many of his relatives as “a basket of deplorables.”

That man hadn’t heard, of course, what Hillary went on to say (which was not widely reported by the mainstream media), that the other half of Trump voters:

are people who feel that government has let them down, the economy has let them down, nobody cares about them, nobody worries about what happens to their lives and their futures. They are just desperate for change. Doesn’t really even matter where it comes from. They won’t wake up and see their jobs disappear; lose a kid to heroin; feel like they’re in a dead end. Those are people who we have to understand and empathize with as well.

That man cast his vote against someone with her name, but it wasn’t Hillary Clinton.