Hacks

The Inside Story of the Break-ins and Breakdowns That Put Donald Trump in the White House

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ALSO BY DONNA BRAZILE

Cooking with Grease: Stirring the Pots in American Politics
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In loving memory of my father, Lionel Brazile Sr.,
my beloved sister, Sheila Brazile,
my fearless uncles Nat, Floyd, and Douglas,
Harlem's finest, my aunt Lucille,
my friend and mentor, David Kaufmann,
my DNC colleague and patriot, Seth Rich,
and my beloved Pomeranian, Chip Joshua

Marvin Brazile (Booty Wipes).
I miss y'all . . .
While I was in Martha's Vineyard and Cape Cod, WikiLeaks, and its distribution partners Guccifer 2.0 and DCLeaks, had kept busy. I don't know if Guccifer is a man or a woman or a robot, but it was releasing these private items from the Democrats in a manner that seemed very attuned to the rhythm of the United States election. Before I left for Martha's Vineyard, Guccifer released cell phone numbers and passwords from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee so that those candidates would not begin their campaign season undistracted. Less than a week later, documents describing voting turnout models for Florida and Pennsylvania and a few other battleground states appeared online, along with some private emails from Rep. Nancy Pelosi's staff.

After I left Elaine's on August 23, my destination was Brooklyn. I would finally see HQ, the high-rise epicenter of campaign power. I was eager to see it, not just because I wanted to be face-to-face with the people who had been blocking my efforts. I love the atmosphere of a campaign around Labor Day, when everyone is ramping up for Election Day. I've worked on many presidential campaigns, and one of my fondest feelings is...
walking into the bustle of the campaign office and hearing the phones ringing and seeing the staff and the volunteers rushing around, people in intense conversations in the hallways, making decisions on the fly. My taxi pulled up in front of the towering brick office building at One Pierrepont Plaza and I hopped out.

Security was tight. I had to be escorted up from the lobby to the offices on the tenth floor, where I felt some of that campaign energy I craved. By contrast, on the executive floor, where Hillary's top staff worked, it was calm and antiseptic, like a hospital. It had that techno-bush, as if someone had died. I felt like I should whisper. Everybody's fingers were on their keyboards, and no one was looking at anyone else. You half-expected to see someone in a lab coat walk by.

In campaigns, it's not just about electing a candidate. It's about getting citizens more engaged in their democracy and giving them a voice. The campaign succeeds when it makes supporters feel that they hold in their own hands the power to change the country. When you have that feeling, you usually aren't too quiet about it.

When I was tip-toeing around the muffled Clinton head- quarters I thought of what my friend Tony Coelho used to ask me about my campaigns. He'd always ask, "Are the kids fucking? Are they having sex? Are they having fun? If not, let's create something to get that going, or otherwise we're not going to win."

I didn't sense much fun or fucking in Brooklyn.

Look, I really respected a lot of people in that building. They were all my old friends. But I could see in that visit that it was run only by analytics and data, which is only part of what you need to win an election. Robby Mook believed he understood the country by the clusters of information about voters he had gathered.

I remember saying to him, after he described this very smart way he had determined which candidate people in a particular group would vote for, that he was neglecting the other half of the equation: what would they do with that knowledge, and what would they tell voters?

"If we're not talking to new people, how are we going to register new voters?"

We were talking in his corner office with a view of Brooklyn and Manhattan, a private space that I do not think he used much. I saw him as most comfortable out at a table with the others who understood his love of data. He has a cool gaze of someone who has a determined sense of values and judges everyone by those principles. That inner cool makes someone like me who runs hot feel as though I'm bouncing off the walls when I talk. Perhaps that was something he'd agree with me on, because he was not agreeing with me about the need to spend more money to encourage the Obama coalition to vote.

Even when Clinton squeaked by in the Iowa caucuses and when she took a drubbing in New Hampshire, Robby was unwavering. He had a plan and he was sticking to it. That plan was the perfect opposition to Clinton's campaign in 2008, when she lost to Obama. She nearly ran out of money in February, but this time she was cash rich and laser-focused on gathering and controlling that money. Her campaign had been reined with divisions, public arguments, and policy disputes. Robby had a campaign tightly controlled from the top, and even when things contradicted his assumptions, he always stuck to his plan. That plan did not include giving more money to me.

For Robby, everything had a sense of a scale. I had seen a little bit of this in the Obama campaign, but he was a different kind of candidate. His candidacy lent itself to microanalysis-based targeting because the support for him, and for his message of hope, was organic. The data helped bring Obama's message to an audience of people who might be receptive to his message but did not know about him.

By contrast, Hillary was a well-known candidate, on the political scene for decades. People still had doubts about her. And while she was quite capable of validating and inflating them.
which discouraged enthusiasm for this familiar face. The attitude in Brooklyn was that Hillary was such a superior candidate that she had already locked up the race. Clinton’s campaign needed people to call and remind them: Hillary needs you today to go out and talk about her plan to create jobs. Or, Hillary needs you today to go out and talk about how she is going to protect children and child health. I did not see that. I heard them saying that they only needed to register five new Hillary voters in this neighborhood, and seven over here.

Why five? Why not ten? Or why not fifty?

Well, that was the precise number of people we needed in order to win a precinct.

“Well, good, but you better get five more so you can go home and think that you really have a margin that will win,” I told Robby and his team.

They were so precise, they made me feel as though this style of politics I had learned in my forty years was about to be put out to pasture. My world was the lost art of touching people, reaching people where they live, where they eat, where they played and where they prayed.

They did understand that I had some skills to lend to the campaign effort at headquarters, and that was to bring emotion into the room. Robby asked me to address the staff and volunteers, and I gave a speech off the cuff that was designed to remind them of the reasons we do this. How we see a better future for ourselves and for our families and we want to do everything we can, sacrifice our evenings, weekends, and holidays to bring this message to the world. Campaigns offer us a rare opportunity to live our values in our daily lives, to be patriotic and honorable in a way that few things we do allow. I could feel that I had the crowd with me as I spoke, and I hoped that I left them feeling better, more enthusiastic, and able to push harder to get Hillary into the Oval Office.

I did not leave Brooklyn feeling enthusiastic, though. They saw me only as someone who could rouse up the emotions, but they were not interested in my practical advice. My feeling was that data was a tool for engagement, but there was no substitute for that human touch. This was a message that sunk to the carpet in the antiseptic rooms in Brooklyn.

And into this hushed atmosphere, week after week, WikiLeaks dropped stolen emails, thousands at a time, with the clear purpose of distraction. Every time emails were released, the press stopped dead in its tracks to paw through them and see what they could find that would embarrass the candidate or the campaign. With the damaging information contained in the leaked emails, and the antics of the GOP nominee covered hour after hour by the cable stations, it was as if Hillary was not even campaigning. She was always reacting, rarely advancing.

I had planned my trip to Florida so that I could gather evidence about how Hillary was capturing the voters there. I have an intimate knowledge of every part of Florida, which I earned in 2000, when we spent thirty-seven days scrutinizing ballots in every county of that state trying to get a win for Al Gore. I’m fortunate that I have black skin, or the scars from those thirty-seven days would be visible at just a glance. I know the politics of Florida from the swanky streets of Miami Beach to the bodegas and barrios of Little Haiti in the western part of Orlando. That was where I was headed on this trip. We had a Senate seat up for grabs as well as several Congressional seats. There would be a lot there for me to take in so that I might understand the way things were going in the campaign. Were they active and energized by the campaign? Or had the steady stream of distractions sapped the energy there, too?

The first appointment was a telephone town hall with millennials. Many of their questions were about how to find a way to
sell Hillary to their peers. They were having a hard time converting Bernie supporters to Hillary supporters. They liked Hillary in a lukewarm way, but many were still yearning for Bernie. I took as many questions about him as I did about Hillary. Then one young man asked me how he was going to talk to his family. All of his relatives were voting for Trump.

I had heard this question before. Hearing it in Florida made me realize for this election I was fast becoming a family therapist. “First, don’t start an argument with them, because that will only harden them,” I advised. “Here’s what you have to tell them. Take a look at Donald Trump’s life. I know people are enamored of him that he’s a businessman and people think that he’s successful, but there is nothing in his history that indicates he will help people like your family. Remind them that he has stiffed so many workers, the people who have helped him build his huge hotels and casinos. Rather than pay them, he has stiffed them. Why do they think that he would not treat the country the same way?”

I felt good after that answer. I hoped the young man on the phone felt that it was a good answer, too. I was making an attempt at talking about Trump in a way that did not entangle me or them in his crazy statements and outrageous tweets. If people would pay attention to Trump’s record and his behavior instead of Hillary’s, this might be a fair fight.

I also visited black radio stations, where the hosts would take calls from listeners. They were not encouraging. People on the ground in Orlando said no one was talking about Hillary on the radio, and those who wanted to support her didn’t have any literature to hand out or yard signs to display. Everywhere I went when I was canvassing with volunteers people were asking for the same things. They wanted a way to show their support for Hillary, and I did see a few Trump signs here and there. Nowhere did I see any visible support for Hillary.

The only signs I saw were in the campaign headquarters. I walked down blocks and blocks of Little Haiti. I did not notice one campaign sign. Brooklyn told me that the battleground states had signs. Then they said, “Don’t worry about signs.” They believed signs were not as important as data. Signs are an indication that there’s activity. And where there’s activity, there’s passion. Where there’s passion, there’s purpose. Yet I saw none of that in these neighborhoods that should have been for Hillary.

I had scheduled an appearance on a Haitian AM radio station program, Morning Glory with Bishop Victor T. Curry. These Haitian stations play gospel and speak in Creole, but they do a lot of talking and some of it is about politics. The listeners are not millions of people, but the thousands that do listen have the radio tuned on for hours every day. The radio brings the community together, and it costs very little to advertise there. When the bishop asked me when the campaign was going to start a dialogue with his audience, I knew what he meant by that. When were they going to spend a few hundred dollars in advertising there, which would encourage him to urge his followers to get out and vote?

I wasn’t trying to rewrite Brooklyn’s strategic plan and I really wasn’t interested in being the campaign manager, but it was hard to hear these complaints directly from people and not relay it back to someone. I texted Marlon Marshall, Robby’s lieutenant, and the director of state campaigns and political engagement, my impressions and suggestions to make sure to convey them while they were fresh in my mind. I thought this was valuable information. We were still eight weeks out from Election Day, so there was time to correct this situation. At least the campaign should be encouraged that so many people wanted to find a way to help. Marlon dismissed my report with a condescending tone in his responses. He and Robby didn’t appreciate challenges to their strategy.
I did not get the feeling that I was heard, though. Instead, I got the feeling that what I was saying was further proof that I was out of step with their vision for Hillary’s victory. Perhaps they thought that because the Haitians were inclined to vote for Hillary they could assume that vote was locked in and move on to a neighborhood where the votes were more contested. This ran counter to everything I had learned in politics. You build enthusiasm among those you can depend on and make that support so powerful that it spills over into the areas surrounding the little piece of turf you can depend upon. This is how you build enthusiasm for Election Day.

After nearly three days in Florida, my next stop was the battleground of Colorado, which Bernie had won. The state highlighted the campaign’s other big problem: the rift between the Bernie supporters and the Hillary supporters. Brooklyn needed to concentrate on winning the election. Healing the divisions between these factions was a problem I felt the party should solve for the campaign.

I had an early flight on August 31, so I went to my hotel in Denver and took a nap. Wellington Webb, the former mayor of Denver, picked me up at the Hyatt to take me to Aurora for a campaign event. This man was bending my ear something fierce about how the senatorial candidate, Michael Bennet, was not putting enough investment in the ground game, and how Hillary had to send more surrogates to engage the electorate or she might just lose Colorado. Did she know that? She should come here, he said. This should be on her schedule for the fall.

The next day, at an event in Denver, state party chair Rick Palacio invited all the county chairs to meet with me. Again I would be the one who would take in all their criticisms and disappointments.

It was really nice outside, and I remember enjoying the cool air. I had this wistful feeling that if I could have been in control of my life I would have stayed in Colorado for a week, enjoying the mountain air. My feeling of not wanting to leave mixed with my sense of urgency for the campaign. That mood in Brooklyn was one of self-satisfaction and inevitability. The polls were showing Hillary holding steady, between five and eight points ahead of Trump and with a clear path to 270 electoral college votes. The mood I was gathering on the ground, however, was much more restless.

The meeting with the state county party chairs was combative. One man in particular I remembered from the platform committee. Dennis Obdusky had come to Orlando looking for a fight. When he saw the process was designed to hear him out, he settled down and pitched in to find language we could all agree on. We went from being enemies to being buddies. I liked people like Dennis—disrupters working for good—because I had been one when I worked on Jesse Jackson’s campaign for president in 1984.

Now, in Colorado, this man I had bonded with had been elected county chair.

Dennis was concerned that there would not be a role for the Bernie folks in the state now that Hillary was the candidate.

“‘Well,’” I said. “‘You’re here, aren’t you?’

I advised Dennis that this would not be easy. No one gives up power without a fight, but he had a good position and the Bernie folks already had won a big battle. Ninety percent of the party platform represented what Bernie believed. Take the win, I said, and build upon it.

As I got to the airport to fly back to DC on September 2, my mind returned to Donald Trump’s claim that the Democrats were taking the African American vote for granted.
What I had found on the streets of Orlando seemed to support it. All the data showed that 1 percent or fewer of black folk supported Donald Trump, so that vote seemed to Brooklyn to be in the bag for Hillary. No need to spend any money to court it when the poll numbers and the data points were so overwhelmingly in Hillary’s favor. I knew that to be true, but there is a difference between telling a pollster that you favor a candidate and getting yourself out the door on Election Day and going to the polls. The campaign was telling people that electing Hillary would be a historic change, but in their daily lives they did not see how it would change anything for them. I didn’t see much evidence that the campaign had a story it wanted to tell these voters that would persuade them otherwise.

Colorado, too, had its own air of disappointment. The Bernie supporters who were so energized in the primary season had believed that they could change the world, fight corporate corruption, and get some relief for middle-class families. They saw Hillary as not much different from any other candidate: chasing money instead of reflecting the will of the people. They were not satisfied by the strides they had made in changing the party platform victory. They saw it as a symbolic win. And they were not that far off.

We negotiate the party platform like we’re writing the Constitution, but as soon as that battle is over, the candidate faces the new realities of the campaign and does whatever he or she sees as pragmatic. The platform could be seen as a yardstick to use to measure the candidates’ actions, but it never has been something they are beholden to accomplish.

What I saw was a feeling of frustration and resignation rather than the energy needed to win. I’ve been in campaigns long enough to know what the odor of failure smells like.

And when you catch a whiff of it, no matter what the numbers say, you should worry.