

# THE ROAD TO FORTY-SEVEN

## HOW WE GOT HERE

How Donald Trump Became the  
Catalyst for a Generational Project

J. A. SNIDER

DOWNLOADABLE EXCERPT

# THE ROAD TO FORTY SEVEN

## HOW WE GOT HERE

How Donald Trump Became the  
Catalyst for a Generational Project

by J.A. Snider

# THE ARCHITECTS OF CAPTURE

A cigar box sits on a Richmond lawyer's desk. Inside it: fountain pens, a dog-eared pocket Constitution, and a stack of letters from executives who fear the country is slipping away from them. Nearby, students pin flyers for Ralph Nader's call to corporate responsibility.

In 1971 America, the argument was everywhere—at pulpits, in lecture halls, on factory floors—about who would get to define the public good. The era that followed was ushered in not with slogans or picket signs but with a fountain pen and paper.

---

## CHAPTER 1

# The Powell Memo as Blueprint

It was August 1971, and Lewis F. Powell Jr. sat at his desk in Richmond, Virginia. A corporate lawyer with deep ties to the tobacco industry, Powell had just been approached by his friend, Eugene Sydnor Jr., an official with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber wanted Powell's advice. American capitalism, Sydnor said, was under siege—from student radicals, consumer advocates, even ministers preaching economic justice from the pulpit.

Powell drafted a confidential memorandum titled *Attack on the American Free Enterprise System*. Polite in tone but urgent in message, it warned: “*No thoughtful person can question that the American economic system is under broad attack... The time has come—indeed, it is long overdue—for the wisdom, ingenuity, and resources of American business to be marshaled against those who would destroy it.*”

He was not calling for a short-term fix. He was sketching a long-term strategic plan.

## The Memo

The Powell Memo was as much diagnosis as prescription. It pointed to a chorus of critics—consumer activists like Ralph Nader, academics who dared to question capitalism, journalists investigating corporate malfeasance, and regulators emboldened by the Great Society. To Powell, this was not healthy debate but a coordinated assault.

His recommendations were strikingly specific:

- Fund new research centers at universities.
- Establish legal foundations to challenge regulation in the courts.
- Invest in media outlets to shape public opinion.
- Mobilize business leaders as political actors, not just economic ones.

At first, the memo circulated quietly within the Chamber of Commerce. But in 1972, syndicated columnist Jack Anderson obtained a copy and published its contents in his Washington Merry-Go-Round column.

Anderson wrote with alarm: “*What Mr. Powell advocates is the establishment of a wellfinanced, corporate-backed machine to shape the thinking of the American people.*” His exposé transformed a confidential strategy document into a public manifesto.

What Powell intended as a private blueprint was in Anderson’s words, a “corporate counterrevolution.”

In the cramped newsroom of the Washington Merry-Go-Round, Jack Anderson tapped a pencil against his desk while one of his reporters read aloud from Powell’s memo. Fund media. Capture courts. Train cadres. The words didn’t sound like panic; they sounded like a program. “*This isn’t a press release,*” Anderson muttered. “*It’s a blueprint.*” The next morning’s column didn’t just expose a memo. It announced a campaign, giving corporate America a story about itself: aggrieved, disciplined, on the verge of counterattack.

## From Memo to Movement

The leak gave the memo notoriety, but its real influence came in boardrooms and donor circles. Wealthy families—the Coors in Colorado, the Kochs in Kansas, the Olins and Bradleys in the Midwest, the Scaifes in Pennsylvania—treated it as a call to arms.

They funded institutions that could put Powell’s vision into practice.

Over the next five decades, the memo’s vision was executed with discipline. New think tanks sprang up dedicated to reframing debates and producing policy proposals. Legal networks were built to train a generation of judges and clerks who would carry corporate-friendly interpretations of the Constitution.

The Heritage Foundation (1973) specialized in turning ideology into policy briefs ready for congressional staffers. The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) expanded its scholarly reach, embedding conservative voices in policy debates. The Cato Institute, founded in 1977, injected libertarian arguments against regulation and taxation into mainstream discourse. Organizations like ALEC (the American Legislative Exchange Council) began writing “model bills” for state legislatures, prepackaged policies that favored deregulation and privatization.

Lobbyists multiplied in Washington. Campaign contributions ballooned after *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976) and later *Citizens United* (2010) unleashed a torrent of money into politics. Public-interest watchdogs and unions that had once balanced corporate power were steadily outspent and outmaneuvered.

The language of public life shifted. “Deregulation” was sold as efficiency. “Tax relief” was pitched as fairness. “Free markets” were

framed as synonymous with freedom itself.

For ordinary Americans, the effects came slowly. A little more debt here, a little less security there. But the cracks widened.

A teacher who gave her career to the classroom discovered her pension had been gutted by risky financial maneuvers. A machinist in Michigan watched his real wages stagnate even as his company posted record profits. A veteran returning home found his GI Bill benefits insufficient to cover soaring tuition costs that his father's generation had paid with ease.

Each of them had kept faith with the American Dream. The Dream had not kept faith with them.

By the time Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, the infrastructure was ready. Heritage's Mandate for Leadership—a thousand-page transition guide—became the playbook for Reagan's administration.

Powell had drafted a warning; by the 1980s, it was an instruction manual in action.

**THE MYTH:** Powell's memo was a gentleman's lament—history would have unfolded the same way without it.

**THE REALITY:** The memo supplied a narrative and a network map. Elites don't mobilize around abstractions; they mobilize around plans. The memo turned diffuse anxiety into a long game with targets, timelines, and institutions.

## The Birth of Conservative Infrastructure

The results went beyond think tanks. Donor-funded scholarships and fellowships created a talent pipeline. Young conservatives

trained in policy shops and legal clinics entered government service primed to carry the ideology forward.

In 1982, law students at Yale, Harvard, and the University of Chicago launched the Federalist Society, offering a professional home for those skeptical of liberal legal orthodoxy. Within a generation, it had become the dominant network shaping Republican judicial nominations.

Media followed the same trajectory. In the 1970s and 1980s, business-funded publications and commentary challenged what conservatives saw as a liberal press monopoly. This culminated in the rise of Fox News in 1996, a network explicitly built to deliver news through a conservative lens—fulfilling Powell’s call for media counterweights.

The machine matured into a self-reinforcing ecosystem:

- **Think tanks framed the issues.**
- **Media outlets amplified them.**
- **State policy networks localized them.**
- **Courts and judges ratified them.**

Ironically, Powell himself downplayed the memo’s influence. In later interviews, he suggested it was simply a lawyer’s reflections, not a revolutionary manifesto. But by then, the evidence was undeniable: his call had been taken up with zeal. The Chamber of Commerce had become a political player, think tanks had flourished, and corporate America discovered its collective voice in politics.

## Weimar's Lesson: When Elites Bet on Control

Germany's Weimar Republic did not fall because it lacked elections or newspapers—it fell because economic crisis, elite panic, and institutional gamesmanship hollowed those forms from the inside. Conservative power brokers convinced themselves they could use an insurgent to discipline democracy and then put him back in his box. They were wrong.

Weimar's judiciary remained on the bench, parliament still met, headlines still ran—but norms thinned, rules bent, and the vocabulary of “national survival” excused each departure. By the time parties realized they had *legalized* themselves into illegality, the door had closed behind them.

While America has not reached Weimar's point of no return, Powell's quiet architecture rhymes with the same temptation: to manage a democracy rather than serve it. The lesson is not foregone doom; it's a warning label. When influence is redesigned to be self-reinforcing—think tanks, model bills, aligned courts—the *forms* of democracy can endure while the *substance* is siphoned into private hands.

## Legacy and Continuity

By the 1980s, the Powell Memo's fingerprints were everywhere. Deregulation became bipartisan orthodoxy. The phrase “big government” carried a stigma. Universities housed conservative programs and centers that reshaped intellectual debate. Courts increasingly reflected the philosophy Powell had urged corporate America to cultivate.

And the lineage continued. In 2023, the Heritage Foundation released *Project 2025*—a nearly 1,000-page plan for the next conservative administration. Its goals—purging civil servants, centralizing executive power, dismantling regulatory agencies—read like Powell’s memo brought to full maturity.

## Conclusion

The Powell Memo was not a coup attempt, nor was it an idle reflection. It was an architecture of influence, drafted in the genteel language of a Richmond lawyer but designed to wage a generational battle.

The machine that would later carry Donald Trump to the White House did not begin with a populist eruption. It began with a secret memo in 1971, circulated among businessmen who feared the country they envisioned, a country that benefited them, was in danger—and they decided to build a machine to take it back.

**CHAPTER 2****Building the Machine**

The conservative counterrevolution did not spread through street protests or spontaneous uprisings. It was engineered, brick by brick, in boardrooms, law schools, and statehouses. What began as Powell's urgent memo in 1971 quickly evolved into a coordinated strategy: build institutions that could generate ideas, shape legislation, and capture the courts. By the late 20th century, this machine was no longer theoretical. This chapter traces how the Powell blueprint moved from paper to power—and how the quiet construction of infrastructure would alter the course of American democracy.

**Think Tanks and the Language of Power**

In the years following Powell's memo, a new breed of think tank rose to prominence. Unlike the slow-moving, academic institutions of the past, these organizations were built for speed and impact. The Heritage Foundation deliberately rejected the ivory tower model. Its reports were short, accessible, and designed to land on the desks of congressional staffers who needed quick arguments to justify policy positions. Heritage's research wasn't just scholarship; it was ammunition.

The American Enterprise Institute (AEI), with roots stretching back to the 1930s, retooled itself in this new environment. It paired scholars with former government officials, providing the air of authority that journalists and policymakers craved. Meanwhile, the Cato Institute, launched in 1977 with libertarian funding, pushed for aggressive deregulation and personal freedom framed through the lens of minimal government.

In the early 1990s, Republican strategist Frank Luntz convened focus groups to test language around taxes. Behind one-way glass, Luntz watched focus groups nod and wince as terms flashed on a screen: tax relief, job creators, government takeover. The dials spiking not as facts but as feelings.

Through these studies, he learned that Americans recoiled at the phrase “estate tax” but responded with fury to “death tax.” He realized that language wasn’t a garnish, it was the main course.

Say “estate tax” and you get a shrug. Say “death tax” and you get a movement. Within a decade, nearly every Republican politician had adopted the new phrase, shifting the debate from wealth redistribution to what sounded like a punishment for dying.

### **CASE FILE: The Language Lab**

**The Template:** Test words until they wound. “Death tax” instead of “estate tax.” “Job creators” instead of “employers.”

**The Scale:** Pollsters focus-grouped thousands in the 1990s and 2000s, arming politicians with phrases that shifted debates before they began.

**The Effect:** Policy was reframed as morality.

This was the genius of the machine: change the vocabulary, and you change the fight. Tax cuts became “tax relief.” Polluters were defended in the name of “regulatory certainty.” Employers became “job creators.” Once the words took hold, arguments were won before debates even began.

## ALEC and the Statehouse Strategy

While think tanks supplied words and ideas, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) supplied something more tangible: laws. Founded in 1973, ALEC specializes in producing “model legislation”—pre-drafted bills that could be introduced by state lawmakers with minimal edits.

Imagine a midwestern capitol, a freshman legislator drops a PDF into a staffer’s inbox. “Swap the state name and add our sponsor line,” the email says. The draft attachment—in tight prose and citation-ready—reads like in-house work. Only in the metadata is there a clue: `alec_model_2009_voterID_final`.

In 2012, investigative journalists discovered that more than 30 state legislatures had introduced near-identical bills requiring voter ID at the polls. The phrasing was so uniform that in some cases, lawmakers accidentally left in ALEC’s formatting marks. What looked like local concern for “election integrity” was in fact a national campaign coordinated from ALEC’s playbook.

ALEC’s bills covered a wide range: “Stand Your Ground” laws expanding the right to use lethal force in self-defense; environmental deregulation bills undermining clean water protections; preemption laws blocking cities from raising their minimum wage.

### **CASE FILE: The Model Bill**

**The Template :** Hand a busy legislator a ready-to-file draft with talking points.

**The Scale :** Hundreds of near-identical laws across dozens of states.

**The Effect :** National outcomes by local means—quietly, quickly,

cumulatively. By the early 2000s, ALEC claimed that nearly 1,000 of its bills were introduced each year, with hundreds passing into law. The impact was enormous: even as Washington descended into gridlock, the states became engines of conservative reform.

### **The Federalist Society and Judicial Engineering**

The final piece of the machine targeted the courts. If laws could be passed in the states and framed in Congress, they still needed to survive judicial review. Enter the Federalist Society, founded in 1982 by conservative law students at Yale, Harvard, and the University of Chicago.

At first, it was little more than a debating club. But its mission was ambitious: to create a network of conservative legal thinkers and to promote a judicial philosophy rooted in originalism (interpreting the Constitution according to its original meaning) and textualism (reading laws strictly according to their words).

In 1982, a young law student attending an early Federalist Society conference in Chicago met mentors who would guide him into a federal clerkship. That clerkship led to a Justice Department post. Two decades later, he was on the shortlist for a federal judgeship. Multiply that story by hundreds, and you see how the Society transformed the judiciary: not by sudden capture, but by patient cultivation.

By the 2000s, the Federalist Society was the gatekeeper of conservative judicial appointments. Republican presidents relied on its lists when nominating judges, confident that members would deliver rulings aligned with the conservative legal agenda. Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas became intellectual icons, while Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett—all

with Federalist Society ties—cemented the group’s influence on the Supreme Court.

The Society’s philosophy gave conservative rulings an aura of inevitability. They weren’t partisan decisions, adherents argued—they were the Constitution “speaking for itself.” In reality, originalism functioned as a powerful ideological tool.

### **CASE FILE: The Federalist List**

**The Template:** A pipeline of vetted judicial candidates, bound by ideology and loyalty.

**The Scale:** From law school chapters to clerkships to judgeships, the Society became the gatekeeper for Republican nominations.

**The Effect:** By the 2000s, a president no longer needed to weigh judicial philosophy case by case—he only needed the Federalist Society’s list. The courts, from district benches to the Supreme Court, increasingly reflected one network’s design.

### **Citizens United Opens the Floodgates**

Lobbying and campaign contributions had already reshaped Washington by the 1990s. But the unspoken guardrail was that money still had limits. Courts could uphold caps, Congress could legislate boundaries.

The transformation accelerated with the Supreme Court’s 2010 decision in *Citizens United v. FEC*, which removed restrictions on independent political spending by corporations and unions. In effect, it declared that money was speech, and corporations had the same right to speak as individuals.

The result was a flood of cash into politics. Super PACs and dark money groups poured millions into elections, much of it undisclosed. By 2020, spending in federal elections exceeded \$14 billion—more than double the amount spent in 2016.

For ordinary citizens, this meant watching as their concerns—wages, healthcare, housing—were drowned out by the priorities of corporate donors and lobbyists. A small business owner in Kentucky told a local paper: “*I can’t even get my state rep to return a call. But if you’re a donor, they’ll fly to meet you.*”

### **ACCOUNTABILITY FORK :**

#### **What If Citizens United Had Gone the Other Way?**

In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled in *Citizens United v. FEC* that corporations and unions could spend unlimited amounts on independent political activity. The decision equated money with speech, unleashing a torrent of dark money and Super PAC influence.

Imagine if the Court had upheld restrictions instead. Campaigns might still be costly, but the floodgates of undisclosed spending would never have opened. Citizens might believe their small-dollar donations still mattered. Instead, politics became a high-stakes auction. The quiet lesson to elites: every dollar buys not just influence but insulation from accountability.

With money redefined as speech, politics became an arms race of donors and super-donors. The rules of the game no longer felt rigged in whispers—they were declared from the bench.

## CASE FILE: Citizens United

**The Template:** Treat money as speech, corporations as people.

**The Scale:** In the decade after the 2010 ruling, outside spending in federal elections more than doubled, with dark-money groups masking billions in donations.

**The Effect:** Political competition became an arms race of billionaires. Candidates spent more time courting donors than voters, and citizens concluded—often correctly—that government was for sale.

### The Slow Coup

Political scientists sometimes describe this process as a “slow coup.” No tanks in the streets, no violent takeover—just the quiet redirection of policy and law to serve those who fund the system. The appearance of democracy remains. The machinery still runs. But the inputs are captured.

Over time, this capture reshapes public perception. Voters came to believe, often correctly, that government doesn’t work for them. Cynicism grows. Some disengage altogether, convinced participation is pointless. Others lash out in anger, ready to believe anyone who promises to “drain the swamp.”

### The Psychological Impact

The danger is not just the distortion of the system. It’s also cultural corrosion. When citizens believe politics is controlled by money, trust in democracy itself erodes. Why should a laid-off worker in Michigan or a farmer in Iowa believe their vote matters if billionaires and corporations can drown them out?

This erosion creates fertile soil for authoritarian narratives. Trump's rhetoric about "the swamp" and "rigged systems" landed not because it was new, but because it confirmed what many already felt. He did not invent the suspicion. He weaponized it.

### **Echoes Today**

The signs are visible everywhere:

- Energy companies writing environmental policy.
- Pharmaceutical giants shaping healthcare legislation.
- Wealthy donors gaining ambassador posts or regulatory exemptions.

Citizens see it, and they draw the obvious conclusion: democracy has been sold.

And once citizens lose faith in the fairness of the system, they are more willing to believe that elections, too, are fraudulent. The connection between corporate capture and authoritarianism is not direct but the corrosion is the same. Both thrive on the same condition: the belief that ordinary people no longer matter.

### **The Machine Complete**

By the end of the 20th century, the conservative machine was fully operational. Think tanks provided the language. ALEC provided the bills. The Federalist Society provided the judges. Each component reinforced the others, forming a closed loop of influence.

1. A think tank published a paper on "regulatory reform."
2. ALEC drafted a bill reflecting its recommendations.
3. Statehouses passed the bill into law.
4. The law was challenged in court.
5. Judges shaped by the Federalist Society upheld it.

The ecosystem was seamless. What had begun as Powell’s memo—a plea for business to defend itself—had evolved into a multi-tiered machine capable of shaping American law, culture, and governance for generations.

### **From Memo to Mandate**

In 1980, Lewis Powell was already sitting on the Supreme Court when Ronald Reagan was elected president. On his desk, aides occasionally placed policy memos that echoed Powell’s own 1971 words. He once demurred when asked about the influence of his memo, insisting it was “a lawyer’s work, nothing more.” But by then, the machine had taken on a life of its own. What Powell drafted as a warning had become a mandate that others were determined to follow.

### **Conclusion**

The conservative machine did not emerge overnight, nor was it the work of a single man. It was the product of institutions carefully designed, funded, and aligned with one another. It was language turned into law, law upheld by judges, and judges legitimized by rhetoric.

This was the infrastructure that prepared the way for 47. By the time Donald Trump entered the stage, the machine was waiting—primed, polished, and ready to be driven—and the people no longer trusted the system that once valued and protected them. It only needed someone shameless enough to floor the accelerator.