

The Blow-it-all-up Billionaires.

When politicians take money from megadonors, there are strings attached. But with the reclusive duo who propelled Trump into the White House, there's a fuse.

Part 1 of 4 –

Last December, about a month before Donald Trump's inauguration, Rebekah Mercer arrived at Stephen Bannon's office in Trump Tower, wearing a cape over a fur-trimmed dress and her distinctive diamond-studded glasses. Tall and imposing, Rebekah, known to close friends as Bekah, is the 43-year-old daughter of the reclusive billionaire Robert Mercer. If Trump was an unexpected victor, the Mercers were unexpected kingmakers. More established names in Republican politics, such as the Kochs and Paul Singer, had sat out the general election. But the Mercers had committed millions of dollars to a campaign that often seemed beyond salvaging.

That support partly explains how Rebekah secured a spot on the executive committee of the Trump transition team. She was the only megadonor to frequent Bannon's sanctum, a characteristically bare-bones space containing little more than a whiteboard, a refrigerator and a conference table. Unlike the other offices, it also had a curtain so no one could see what was happening inside. Before this point, Rebekah's resume had consisted of a brief run trading stocks and bonds (including at her father's hedge fund), a longer stint running her family's foundation and, along with her two sisters, the management of an online gourmet cookie shop called Ruby et Violette. Now, she was compiling lists of potential candidates for a host of official positions, the foot soldiers who would remake (or unmake) the United States government in Trump's image.

Rebekah wasn't a regular presence at Trump Tower. She preferred working from her apartment in Trump Place, which was in fact six separate apartments that she and her husband had combined into an opulent property more than twice the size of [Gracie Mansion](#). Still, it quickly became clear to her new colleagues that she wasn't content just to chip in with ideas. She wanted decision-making power. To her peers on the executive committee, she supported Alabama senator Jeff Sessions for attorney general and General Michael Flynn for national security adviser, but argued against naming Mitt Romney secretary of state. Her views on these matters were heard, according to several people on and close to the transition leadership. Rebekah was less successful when she lobbied hard for John Bolton, the famously hawkish former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, to be deputy secretary of state. And when Bolton was not named to any position, she made her displeasure known. "I know it sounds sexist, but she was whiny as hell," says one person who watched her operate. Almost everyone interviewed for this article, supporters and detractors alike, described her style as far more forceful than that of other powerful donors.



Rebekah Mercer (right) is rarely photographed. However, occasionally she can be found in the background of news photos, uncredited in the captions. Here she is arriving at Trump Tower on December 8, with Nick Ayers and Kellyanne Conway. DREW ANGERER/GETTY IMAGES

But then the Mercers aren't typical donors in most senses beyond their extreme wealth. (The exact number of their billions is unknown.) Robert Mercer is a youthful-looking 70. As a boy growing up in New Mexico, he

carried around a notebook filled with computer programs he had written. “It’s very unlikely that any of them actually worked,” [he has said](#). “I didn’t get to use a real computer until after high school.” Robert went on to work for decades at IBM, where he had a reputation as a brilliant computer scientist. He made his vast fortune in his 50s, after his work on predicting financial markets led to his becoming co-CEO of Renaissance Technologies, one of the world’s most successful quantitative hedge funds. A longtime colleague, David Magerman, recalls that when Robert began working at Renaissance in 1993, he and his wife, Diana, were “grounded, sweet people.” (Magerman was suspended from Renaissance in February after making critical comments about Robert in *The Wall Street Journal*.) But “money changed all that,” he says. “Diana started jetting off to Europe and flying to their yacht on weekends. The girls were used to getting what they wanted.”

At Renaissance, Robert was an eccentric among eccentrics. The firm is legendary for shunning people with Wall Street or even conventional finance backgrounds, instead favoring scientists and original thinkers. Robert himself, by all accounts, is extremely introverted. Rarely seen in public, he likes to spend his free time with his wife and three daughters. When, in 2014, Robert accepted an award from the Association for Computational Linguistics, he [recalled](#), in a soft voice and with quiet humor, his consternation at being informed that he was expected to give “an oration on some topic or another for an hour, which, by the way, is more than I typically talk in a month.” Sebastian Mallaby’s account of the hedge-fund elite, *More Money Than God*, describes him as an “icy cold” poker player who doesn’t remember having a nightmare. He likes model trains, having once purchased a set for \$2.7 million, and has acquired one of the country’s largest collections of machine guns.

For years, Robert has embraced a supercharged libertarianism with idiosyncratic variations. He is reportedly pro-death penalty, pro-life and pro-gold standard. He has contributed to an ad campaign opposing the construction of the ground zero mosque; [Doctors for Disaster Preparedness](#), a group that is associated with fringe scientific claims; and Black Americans for a Better Future—a vehicle, the Intercept [discovered](#), for an African-American political consultant who has accused Barack Obama of “relentless pandering to homosexuals.” Magerman, Robert’s former colleague at Renaissance, recalls him saying, in front of coworkers, words to the effect that “your value as a human being is equivalent to what you are paid. ... He said that, by definition, teachers are not worth much because they aren’t paid much.” His beliefs were well-known at the firm, according to Magerman. But since Robert was so averse to publicity, his ideology wasn’t seen as a cause for concern. “None of us ever thought he would get his views out, because he only talked to his cats,” Magerman told me.

Robert’s middle daughter Rebekah shares similar political beliefs, but she is also very articulate and, therefore, able to act as her father’s mouthpiece. (Neither Rebekah nor Robert responded to detailed lists of questions for this article.) Under Rebekah’s leadership, the family foundation [poured](#) some \$70 million into conservative causes between 2009 and 2014.^[1] 1. According to *The Washington Post*, the family donated \$35 million to conservative think tanks and at least to \$36.5 million to individual GOP races. The first candidate they threw their financial weight behind was Arthur Robinson, a chemist from Oregon who was running for Congress. He was best known in his district for co-founding an [organization](#) that is collecting thousands of vials of urine as part of an effort it says will “revolutionize the evaluation of personal chemistry.” Robinson didn’t win, but he got closer than expected, and the Mercers got a taste of what their money could do. In 2011, they made one of their most consequential investments: a reported \$10 million in a new right-wing media operation called Breitbart.

That the family gravitated toward Andrew Breitbart’s upstart website was no accident. The Mercers are “purists,” says Pat Caddell, a former aide to Jimmy Carter who has shifted to the right over the years. They believe Republican elites are too cozy with Wall Street and too soft on immigration, and that American free enterprise and competition are in mortal danger. “Bekah Mercer might be prepared to put a Democrat in Susan Collins’ seat simply to rid the party of Susan Collins,” a family friend joked by way of illustrating her thinking. So intensely do the Mercers want to unseat Republican senator John McCain^[2] ...

2. *Some have speculated that McCain may have angered the Mercers in 2014, when the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, on which McCain was the ranking member at the time, asserted that*

Renaissance had used complex financial methods to underestimate its taxes by \$6 billion. Renaissance has told The New York Times its tax practices are lawful.

... that they gave \$200,000 to support an opposing candidate who once held a town hall meeting to discuss chemtrails—chemicals, according to a long-standing conspiracy theory, that the federal government is spraying on the public without its knowledge. In short, unlike other donors, the Mercers are not merely angling to influence the Republican establishment—they want to obliterate it. One source told me that, in a meeting with Sheldon Adelson and Robert Mercer a few years ago, the casino mogul asked Robert if he was familiar with certain big Republican players. According to the source, Robert shut him down. “I don’t know any of your fancy friends,” he replied, “and I haven’t got any interest in knowing them.”

And so it seemed almost inevitable that their paths converged with Bannon’s when he took over Breitbart in 2012. The Mercers recognized Bannon as an ideological ally. They also appreciated how quickly he improved the website’s finances. Unlike many people in their orbit, Bannon wasn’t obsequious: According to one person who often spends time with them, he made zero effort to dress up around his benefactors, often appearing in sweatpants and “looking almost like a homeless person.” Bannon was respectful around Robert, says this person, but with Rebekah he was more apt to say precisely what he thought: “He worked for Bob; he worked with Rebekah.”

Although the Mercers had initially been persuaded to back Texas senator Ted Cruz in the Republican primary, Bannon preferred Trump, and by the time of the Republican National Convention the Mercers were with him. Rebekah made her move last August, at a fundraiser at the East Hampton estate of Woody Johnson, the owner of the New York Jets. According to two sources, one who strategized with the Mercers and another who worked closely with Trump, Rebekah insisted on a 30-minute face-to-face meeting with Trump, in which she informed him that his campaign was a disaster. (Her family had pledged \$2 million to the effort about a month earlier, so she felt comfortable being frank.) Trump, who knew her slightly, was willing to listen. He had been disturbed by recent stories detailing disorganization in his campaign and alleging ties between Trump’s campaign manager, Paul Manafort, and pro-Russia officials in Ukraine. Rebekah knew of this and arrived at her meeting with “props,” says the source who strategized with the Mercers: printouts of news articles about Manafort and Russia that she brandished as evidence that he had to go. And she also had a solution in mind: Trump should put Bannon in charge of the campaign and hire the pollster Kellyanne Conway.^[3] Conway had worked for the Mercers’ super PAC.

By the following morning, Rebekah was breakfasting at Trump’s golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey, with the two people he trusts most, Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner, to talk through the proposal in more detail. Within four days, Trump did exactly as Rebekah had advised. Manafort was out. Bannon was in charge. Trump also brought on David Bossie, the president of Citizens United, with whom the Mercers and Bannon had been close for years. Less than four months later, Mercer’s handpicked team had pulled off one of the greatest upsets in American politics. Through a bizarre combination of daring and luck, the insurgents had won. Now, they were Trump’s version of the establishment—which is to say, a very volatile one.

Part 2 of 4 -

On July Fourth weekend in 2014, members of the Mercer clan (Robert, Rebekah and her husband, Sylvain Mirochnikoff) went to visit some new friends. They traveled on Robert’s 203-foot luxury superyacht, the Sea Owl, and anchored just off the WASP enclave of Fishers Island in New York’s Long Island Sound. Their destination, a medieval-style granite castle called White Caps, towered over the shoreline. This was the summer home of Lee and Alice Hanley, Reagan conservatives who’d made their fortune in Texas oil and gas but lived mostly between Greenwich, Connecticut, and Palm Beach, Florida. Like the Mercers, the Hanleys were convinced that the American political establishment was rotten to its foundations. Unlike the Mercers, though, they were popular and vigorous socialites. They loved to entertain and to act as connectors between politicians and donors in their assorted properties, even on their private jet.

That holiday weekend, Lee Hanley revisited the subject of a poll he'd commissioned in 2013 from Pat Caddell, a longtime friend. Hanley had wanted to truly understand the mood of the country and Caddell had returned with something called the "Smith Project." The nickname alluded to the Jimmy Stewart movie "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," because its results were so clear: Americans were hungry for an outsider. It didn't matter whether the candidate came from the left or the right; voters just wanted somebody different. They had lost all faith in the ruling class—the government, the media, Wall Street. "It showed the entire blow-up of the country coming," Caddell told me. "A whole new paradigm developing."

No Republican had yet emerged as a front-runner in the 2016 primary, but the Hanleys believed Ted Cruz could take Caddell's insights and ride them all the way to the White House. They saw Cruz as a unicorn: a dedicated fiscal and social conservative who had broken with his party repeatedly. They were dismissive of Trump. "He doesn't understand politics or geopolitics or anything about the running of the government," Alice Hanley told me recently.

Rebekah Mercer saw the Koch network as hopelessly soft on trade and immigration and was hungry for a way to promote her own more hard-line ideology.

Robert Mercer and Cruz had met before during a conference in February 2014, when Lee Hanley had invited them to the five-diamond Breakers resort in Palm Beach for a grilling session. Robert was impressed by Cruz's intellect, according to a person at the meeting, but worried that the 43-year-old senator was too young and might struggle to capture voters' imaginations. Still, Robert warmed to him over the course of many weekends at various Hanley homes. Apparently, Cruz can hold his alcohol (his preference is cabernet), which is a prized attribute in the Hanleys' circle.

As the Mercers weighed whether to get involved in a presidential race, their calculus was quite different from that of other megadonors, most of whom run massive corporate empires. Various people who have worked with the Mercers on campaigns told me they didn't pressure their candidates to adopt policies that would benefit the family's financial interests, such as favorable regulations for hedge funds. Instead, their mission was a systemic one. Steve Hantler, a friend of Rebekah's, says she was determined to "disrupt the consultant class," which she saw as wasteful and self-serving. She wanted to disrupt the conservative movement, too. Rebekah saw the Koch network as hopelessly soft on trade and immigration and was hungry for a mechanism to promote a more hard-line ideology. According to [Politico](#) and other sources, she was frustrated at the time that no one was taking her seriously. As it happened, however, the family owned what seemed to be an ideal vehicle for achieving her goals.

Around 2012, Robert Mercer reportedly invested \$5 million in a British data science company named SCL Group. Most political campaigns run highly sophisticated micro-targeting efforts to locate voters. SCL promised much more, claiming to be able to manipulate voter behavior through something called psychographic modeling. This was precisely the kind of work Robert valued. "There's no data like more data," he likes to say. Robert had made his money by accumulating piles of data on human behavior (markets might move in a certain direction when it rains in Paris, for instance), in order to make extremely precise and lucrative financial bets. Similarly, SCL claimed to be able to formulate complex psychological profiles of voters. These, it said, would be used to tailor the most persuasive possible message, acting on that voter's personality traits, hopes or fears. The firm has worked on campaigns in Argentina, Kenya, Ghana, Indonesia and Thailand; the Pentagon has used it to conduct surveys in Iran and Afghanistan. Best of all, from the Mercers' perspective, SCL operated entirely outside the GOP apparatus. (A source close to Rebekah said she wanted a "results-oriented" consultant.) As Rebekah saw it, SCL would allow the Mercers to control the data operation of any campaign they supported, giving the family enormous influence over messaging and strategy.

And it would be Rebekah who would actually carry out this plan. Robert preferred to focus on his work at Renaissance, often operating from his Long Island mansion, Owl's Nest. "He wouldn't look under the hood, because that's not what he does," says Bob Perkins, one of Caddell's associates who worked on the Smith Project. Besides, Rebekah was the political animal in the family. (Her older sister Jenji has practiced law; her younger sister Heather Sue is, like Robert, a competitive poker player).

This was a relatively new phenomenon. Rebekah isn't known to have been particularly political earlier in adulthood, while gaining a master's degree in management science and engineering from Stanford, or in early motherhood. (She has four children with her French-born husband, who became an investment banker at Morgan Stanley.) But, after the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision in 2010, which significantly loosened restrictions on political spending, Rebekah decided it was time to "save America from becoming like socialist Europe," as she has put it to several people. She started attending Koch events and donating to the Goldwater Institute, a right-wing think tank based in Arizona. The family's political advocacy accelerated rapidly. It was in 2012 that she really attracted attention in GOP circles when, not long after Mitt Romney lost the presidential race, she stood up before a crowd of Romney supporters at the University Club of New York and delivered a scathing but detailed diatribe about his inadequate data and canvassing operation. "Who is that woman?" people in attendance asked.

With SCL, Rebekah finally had the chance to prove she could do better. The company's American branch was renamed Cambridge Analytica, to emphasize the pedigree of its behavioral scientists. And Rebekah started flying Alexander Nix, the firm's Old Etonian CEO, around the country to introduce him to her contacts. Nix, 41, is not a data scientist (his background is in financial services), but he is a showy salesman. Dressed in impeccably tailored suits, he is in his element on stage making presentations at large conferences. He can, however, come across as arrogant. ("I love the fact that you're telling your story, but I'm the one giving the interview," he told me in a conversation.)



Alexander Nix at Cambridge Analytica's New York office. Rebekah Mercer was impressed by Nix's command of data and artistry on the polo field. JOSHUA BRIGHT/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES

According to Perkins and Caddell, Rebekah and Nix met with them a few times to discuss how CA could use the Smith Project. Rebekah was clearly impressed by Nix. In one meeting, according to Perkins, she gushed about his polo prowess and asked him to show off cellphone photos of himself on horseback. (Nix says he doesn't recall this meeting or others with the three. He also doesn't remember displaying such a picture and can "think of no good reason why Bob or Pat would be interested in horses.") The political veterans were skeptical. "I didn't understand what Nix was talking about," Perkins told me bluntly. Caddell says he was perplexed when Nix wouldn't show him the instruments CA used to predict voter behavior. He also thought the firm didn't grasp the seismic shift underway in American politics. And yet to his great surprise, Bannon vouched for CA, telling Caddell its scientists were "geniuses." Caddell knew that Bannon was beholden to the Mercers—they were, after all, Breitbart's part-owners. According to The New York Times, however, Bannon was also vice president of CA's board. "Even if he did not have a financial investment, he intellectually owned it, which was invaluable," says a fellow political strategist. After he learned of Bannon's involvement, Caddell stopped asking Bannon questions about CA.

In the end, Bannon helped seal the deal between the Mercers and Cruz, with CA as the glue. In the fall of 2014, Toby Neugebauer, a garrulous oil-and-gas billionaire from Texas, took Cruz and his campaign manager, Jeff Roe, to the "Breitbart Embassy," the website's Washington headquarters near the Capitol. Bannon flitted in and out. Nix, as usual, did most of the talking. After Neugebauer and Roe visited SCL's London headquarters, the Cruz team agreed that CA could play a key role in their operation, running models and helping with research.

However, it was made clear to Rebekah and Nix that the entire data analytics operation would be supervised by Chris Wilson, CEO of the research firm WPA. A source close to Cruz told me that Wilson's operation had played a crucial role when Cruz ran for the Senate with only 2 percent name recognition in Texas and defeated a far better-known opponent. Why, then, was CA necessary at all? "No one ever said directly that the quid pro quo for hiring CA was that the Mercers would support Cruz," says someone close to Roe. Nevertheless, after CA was engaged, Neugebauer took a private jet to the Bahamas to meet Robert Mercer on the Sea Owl. When Neugebauer asked him to donate to Cruz's bid, Robert was matter-of-fact. The family would start with \$11 million.

Part 3 of 4 -

All modern political campaigns have to balance their need for exorbitant sums of money with the obsessions of the people who want to give them that money. Roe, the straight-talking manager of the Cruz operation, has observed that running a campaign is like trying to solve a Rubik's cube of complicated personalities and uncomfortable dependencies. He has also told people that he is careful not to get too close to the donors who make his campaigns possible, because they can be so easily annoyed by the most trivial of things—his laugh, for instance, or the way he eats a bread roll.

In the case of the Cruz campaign, the donor obsession in question was Cambridge Analytica. And it wasn't long before Roe and his team suspected that Nix had promised them a more impressive product than he could deliver. On March 4, 2015, Cruz, Roe, Wilson and others gathered in the Hyatt in Washington D.C. for an all-day meeting with Nix and a group of CA senior executives. Wilson took notes on his computer. According to multiple members of the Cruz team, Wilson was dismayed to learn that CA's models weren't fully ready for his focus groups the following week. As far as the team could tell, the only data CA possessed that the campaign didn't already have appeared to be culled from Facebook. In addition, they recalled, CA hadn't set itself up with Data Trust, the Republican National Committee's repository of voter information. At one point, they recall, Nix explained that the National Rifle Association's database of members would be a valuable way to target donors. Wilson typed an emoji with rolling eyes next to the statement because it was so obvious. He told people that he came away thinking, "Red flag, red flag, red flag."

In response to an extensive set of questions, Nix disputed this account of the meeting. He denied that Cambridge Analytica had obtained any data via Facebook—a source of controversy for the firm ever since The Guardian reported in 2015 that CA based its data on research "spanning tens of millions of Facebook users, harvested largely without their permission." Nix also claimed that it was the Cruz team that didn't have access to the RNC's Data Trust for much of the cycle and that "all data used for the majority of the campaign was provided by Cambridge Analytica." However, Mike Shields, then the RNC's chief of staff and Data Trust's senior adviser, told me the Cruz campaign was in fact the second to sign an agreement with Data Trust, in 2014.

Meanwhile, the red flags kept coming. Wilson found the data scientists that CA sent to Houston to be highly efficient at the day-to-day work of his research operation. But according to Cruz staffers, when he began to test CA's specialized models, he found that they were notably off, with, for example, some male voters miscategorized as women. In phone surveys, staffers said, CA's predictions fell short of the 85 percent accuracy the campaign expected. ("Different models have differing levels of accuracy," Nix said in his response. "I suspect these numbers have been taken out of context to make us look bad. In many previous articles the Cruz campaign have highly rated the quality of our data scientists.") By September, CA's first six-month contract was up. A CA employee in the campaign's Houston office accidentally left the invoice in the photocopier, and Wilson happened to fish it out. The invoice totaled an eye-popping \$3,119,052 for work that Wilson estimated to be worth \$600,000 at most. "I can't fucking believe it," Wilson told Roe, who concurred.



Jeff Roe (left) with Ted Cruz (right), who ultimately fell out of Rebekah Mercer's favor. "We felt to some extent she was being manipulated by Bannon," a Cruz adviser said. ETHAN MILLER/GETTY IMAGES

Nix disputed this account too, noting that the firm's fee was "clearly stated in our statement of work and contract." However, a former consultant for the campaign, Tommy Sears, attended budget meetings "for two if not three days" over the matter. "There was an understanding between both parties that the totality of the contract through March 2016 would be \$5.5 million," he says. "The heartburn felt by the Cruz team was that over \$3 million had already been spent by September 1, 2015."

When the Cruz team decided not to pay the full \$3 million, bedlam ensued. A phone call was scheduled with Rebekah, Bannon and CA's attorney. "I understand she's a nice lady," Wilson says politely of Rebekah. According to multiple people on the call, she accused Wilson of undermining CA. Bannon, meanwhile, unleashed a torrent of profanities at the Cruz team. Someone on the call gave me a censored version of his outburst: "The only reason this campaign is where it is right now is because of our people and I. My recommendation to the Mercers is just to pull them out of there and we'll have them on another campaign by Monday." Bannon's language was so foul it was difficult to listen to, says one person on the call who had never met him before. Another of the political pros, who knew Bannon well, wasn't shocked. "That's Steve doing business," he says.

The Cruz team was taken aback by Rebekah's reaction. Some even wondered if she'd been given all the facts. One person who was close to the campaign says, "She is somewhere between the daughter of a brilliant hedge fund manager and mathematician and somebody who runs a bakery in New York. She clearly has a skill set, but the skill set we're discussing here regarding the understanding of the value of data and analytics doesn't fall into that area. She is operating under the information she's been given."

"If Rebekah Mercer was broke and wasn't a major donor in the Republican party," says a Cruz adviser, "nobody would spend two seconds trying to know her... She's not fun. She's just like a series of amoeba cells."

The two sides were also diverging ideologically. In the summer of 2015, according to two sources, Rebekah reprimanded Cruz for an April article he'd co-authored with House Speaker Paul Ryan in *The Wall Street Journal* in support of free trade. She and Bannon told Cruz that he should adopt the positions of Jeff Sessions, whose views on trade and immigration were more in line with the conservative base. By this time, Cruz and his team were becoming increasingly concerned about Bannon's relationship with Rebekah. Bannon (who declined to comment for this article) was now blatantly pro-Trump. Over the course of the primary, Breitbart would publish around 60 pieces disputing that Cruz was eligible to be president because he had been born in Canada. Cruz repeatedly called Rebekah to complain, but she insisted that she had to be "fair and impartial." One of his

advisers says, “We felt to some extent she was being manipulated by Bannon.” A person close to Bannon counters: “There's absolutely no way anyone could manipulate Rebekah Mercer.”

After the first debate in South Carolina, Rebekah gave Cruz a “dressing down” on his performance, according to three sources. “Given what was going on around him—and what he must have truly felt—he behaved like an absolute gentleman,” says a person close to Cruz. Rebekah was incensed that Trump had a tougher immigration policy than Cruz did—she particularly liked Trump’s idea for a total ban on Muslims. Subsequently, Cruz proposed a 180-day suspension on all H1-B visas.

Meanwhile, even though the Cruz staffers generally got along well with their CA counterparts—they sometimes took the visitors country-western dancing—the firm remained a source of friction. In retrospect, Wilson told people, he believed that Nix resented the campaign for allocating work through a competitive bidding process, rather than favoring CA. Two weeks before the Iowa caucuses, Wilson assigned a contract to a firm called Targeted Victory. CA then locked its data in the cloud so it couldn’t be accessed by Roe’s team. The data remained unavailable until, a Cruz campaign source said, it was pretty much too late to be useful. Cruz won the Iowa caucuses anyway.

The Cruz operation became so fed up with Nix that they pushed back, hard, on CA’s bill for its second six-month contract. Wilson was able to negotiate the fees down after, as Cruz staffers recalled, a CA representative accidentally emailed him a spreadsheet documenting the Houston team’s salaries. (Nix said CA had intended to send the spreadsheet.) Still, the campaign wound up paying nearly \$6 million to CA—which represented almost half of the money the Mercers had pledged to spend on Cruz’s behalf.

The acrimony lingered long after Cruz exited the race in May. When he decided not to endorse Trump at the GOP convention, the Mercers publicly [rebuked him](#). In a statement, Cruz was diplomatic: “We were delighted to work with Cambridge Analytica, they were a valuable asset to my campaign, and any rumors to the contrary are completely unfounded.” (The source close to Rebekah added, “I was with Rebekah the other day and Ted Cruz was falling all over her. It’s not fair to blame CA’s methodology for Cruz’s loss.”) Others from Cruz’s team, however, remain bitter about the whole experience. “If Rebekah Mercer was broke and wasn’t a major donor in the Republican Party,” says one, “nobody would spend two seconds trying to know her. ... She’s not fun. She’s just like a series of amoeba cells.”

Par 4 of 4 -

One of the great challenges in reporting this story was that almost every single person in Trump’s orbit claims sole credit for his extraordinary victory on November 8. The multiplying narratives of his win can be difficult to untangle, but it is true that his operation ran somewhat more smoothly after Rebekah Mercer helped to replace Manafort with Bannon. This wasn’t necessarily because Bannon himself was a particularly deft manager—he much preferred to focus on big-picture strategy, especially Trump’s messaging in rallies. Most of the details were left to his deputy, David Bossie—at least until October, when Bossie and Trump got into an argument over Trump’s impetuosity on Twitter and Bossie was kicked off the campaign plane, according to multiple sources. But one undeniable benefit of having Bannon in charge was that Rebekah trusted him.

Bannon, several sources said, can be charming when he chooses to be. And he has a record of successfully cultivating wealthy patrons for his various endeavors over the years. At the same time, certain of his ventures have involved high drama. The most spectacular example is the Biosphere 2, a self-contained ecological experiment under a giant dome in the Arizona desert that was funded by the billionaire Texan Ed Bass. Hired as a financial adviser in the early 1990s, Bannon returned in 1994 and used a court order to take over the project, following allegations that it was being mismanaged. He showed up one weekend along with “a small army of U.S. marshals holding guns, followed by a posse of businessmen in suits, a corporate battalion of investment bankers, accountants, PR people, and secretaries,” according to a history of the project called *Dreaming the Biosphere*. In an effort to thwart Bannon’s takeover, some of the scientists broke the seal of the dome, endangering the experiment.

Because of his relationship with the Mercers, Bannon was able to avoid some of the tensions over Cambridge Analytica that had plagued the Cruz campaign. Before taking the job, he phoned Brad Parscale, a 41-year-old San Antonio web designer who had made websites for the Trump family for years. Although Parscale had never worked in politics before, he now found himself in charge of Trump's entire data operation. According to multiple sources, Parscale told Bannon that he had been hauled into an unexpected meeting with Alexander Nix earlier that summer. Parscale, who is fiercely proud of his rural Kansas roots, immediately disliked the polished Briton. He informed Nix he wasn't interested in CA's psychographic modeling. Parscale and Bannon quickly bonded, seeing each other as fellow outsiders and true Trump loyalists. Bannon told Parscale: "I don't care how you get it done—get it done. Use CA as much or as little as you want." Parscale did ultimately bring on six CA staffers for additional support within his data operation. But he had his own theory^[4]...

(4) Parscale has told people that the campaign's previous models had been based on high turnout figures. "I started to run models with lower turnout which looked like the midterm elections of 2014," he has said. "I mapped out how, based on that, we could get to 305 electoral college votes." Trump got 304.

... of how Trump could secure victory—in the final weeks, he advised Trump to visit Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Michigan, three states no one thought Trump could take. The campaign never used CA's psychographic methodology, as a CA staffer who worked on the campaign later publicly acknowledged at a Google panel.

For the most part, Rebekah kept a low profile during the last phase of the election. On the few occasions that she appeared at Trump Tower, she sat in Bannon's 14th-floor office. "Most people had no idea who she even was," says one person who was there regularly. "The idea that she was on the phone to Trump or anyone all the time, that's nonsense," says a different source from the transition. The Mercers did intervene when a tape surfaced of Trump bragging to NBC's Billy Bush about sexually assaulting women—by making a rare statement in Trump's defense. In a statement to The Washington Post, they said: "If Mr. Trump had told Billy Bush, whoever that is, earlier this year that he was for open borders, open trade and executive actions in pursuit of gun control, we would certainly be rethinking our support for him. We are completely indifferent to Mr. Trump's locker room braggadocio."



Bannon in the East Wing of the White House on January 22, with Mercer (uncredited) in the background. ANDREW HARRER-POOL/GETTY IMAGES

On election night at Trump Tower, Robert Mercer was nowhere to be seen. Rebekah was in Bannon's office. Staffers and Trump children wandered in and out of Parscale's office, because he was usually the first person to have any actual information. Parscale, unlike almost everyone else, including Trump's children, was convinced his boss was going to win. Trump himself remained glued to the television, refusing to believe anything until victory was officially declared. No one I talked to recalls where Rebekah was in the blur of the celebration.

But people certainly remember her presence during the transition. One night, Rebekah called Trump and told him he absolutely had to make Bannon his White House chief of staff. Trump himself later described the phone call—in a manner an observer characterized as affectionately humorous—to a crowd of about 400 people at the Mercers' annual costume party at Robert's mansion on December 3. This year's theme: "Heroes and Villains." A guest recalls that Rebekah was dressed in something "that fitted her very well, with holsters." To the gathering, Trump recounted being woken up at around midnight—Rebekah told friends it was around 10 p.m.—and being bewildered by the late-night tirade. "Rebekah who?" he eventually asked. Everyone laughed," says the observer. As it happened, Bannon didn't actually want to be chief of staff, believing himself to be ill-suited to the role. He was named chief strategist instead.

Rebekah had more than personnel decisions on her mind, however. She was particularly focused on what was referred to on the transition as the “outside group.” After the election, it was widely agreed that the GOP needed a nonprofit arm, supported by major donors, to push the president’s agenda across the country, much as the Obama team had set up Organizing for America in 2009. The most important component of any organization like this is its voter database, since it can be used to seek donations and mobilize supporters behind the president’s initiatives. Rebekah wanted CA to be the data engine, which would essentially give her control of the group. And if the venture were successful, she would have an influence over the GOP that no donor had ever pulled off. Theoretically, if the president did something she didn’t like, she could marshal his own supporters against him, since it would be her database and her money. A friend of Rebekah explains: “She felt it was her job to hold the people she’d got elected, accountable to keep their promises.”

“I’m expecting to be fired by the summer,” Bannon has told friends.

On December 14, there was a meeting to discuss the outside group in a glass-walled conference room on the 14th floor of Trump Tower. Brad Parscale sat at the head of the table. Around him were roughly 12 people, including Rebekah; Kellyanne Conway; David Bossie; Michael Cohen, Trump’s lawyer; Jason Miller, then Trump’s senior communications adviser; and Marc Short, Mike Pence’s senior adviser. Parscale was known to be livid that Alexander Nix had gone on a PR blitz after the election, exaggerating CA’s role. Even worse, Parscale had heard that Nix had been telling people, “Brad screwed up. We had to rescue Brad.” (Nix denied this, saying, “Brad did a brilliant job.”)

And so when Rebekah pushed for CA to run the new group’s data operation, Parscale pushed back. “No offense to the Mercers,” he said, according to multiple attendees. “First, this group is about Trump, not about the Mercers. Second, I don’t have a problem with hiring Cambridge, but Cambridge can’t be the center of everything, because that’s not how the campaign ran.” (He did, however, suggest that Rebekah be on the board.) “No offense taken,” Rebekah replied.

But she would subsequently complain about the exchange to Bannon and others, and continued to lobby for CA to be at the center of the new organization. The situation became so testy that before the inauguration, Jared Kushner brought in Steve Hantler, Rebekah’s friend, to referee. Hantler, a quiet, gentlemanly sort, proposed that the venture be led by someone he knew would be acceptable to both sides: Nick Ayers, a senior adviser to Pence. The “outside group” is now named America First Policies. Parscale is a member, and its first national TV ads have appeared. Ayers has also been cultivating a friendship with Donald Trump Jr., who, sources say, may eventually want to lead the group himself.

The Mercers, however, have withdrawn completely. When it came to the question of whether America First should employ CA, it was Parscale’s view that prevailed: CA has no role in the group at all. “Tens beat nines in poker,” says someone involved with the formation of America First, meaning that Parscale’s close rapport with the Trump family carried greater weight than Rebekah’s connection with Bannon. Rebekah’s relationship with Jared and Ivanka is said to be diminished. Nearly every person I spoke to—Trump supporters, Cruz supporters, fellow donors, friends of Rebekah—agreed on one point: to regain some of her standing, she should fire Alexander Nix. (“We are hoping that she reads your piece and does it,” says a person she works with closely.)

On December 19, Rebekah attended a memorial service in Palm Beach for Lee Hanley, who had died four days before the election. Someone who spoke to her there was expecting her to be thrilled about the election and the position she now occupied. Instead, Rebekah was very low, says this person. She complained about John Bolton being passed over.^[5]

(5). Mercer seems to have favored Bolton less for his foreign policy predilections and more for his popularity with the base. The family donated at least \$3 million in 2015 and 2016 to Bolton’s super PAC, which helped elect a number of conservative congressional candidates. Perhaps not coincidentally, his super PAC paid Cambridge Analytica at least \$700,000 in 2014 and 2016, according to FEC filings.

She was also said to be furious at the appointment of Mitt Romney's niece, Ronna Romney McDaniel, to chair the RNC: To Rebekah, McDaniel personified the very GOP establishment that her family had worked so hard to cast out. "She was emotional," says the person who was there. "She was talking about how there's no rhyme or reason to the people he's appointing, and that Ivanka was acting like first lady, and Melania was very upset about it." When asked about this, a person very close to Rebekah said, "She thinks Ivanka is wonderful and amazing and she thinks Melania is wonderful and amazing. She's very policy-oriented and not involved in personalities."

In the end, Rebekah Mercer's mistake was that she thought she could upend the system and then control the regime she had helped to bring to power. Helping to elect a president wasn't enough: She wanted the machinery to shape his presidency. Instead, the chaos simply continued. An administration full of insurgents, it turns out, functions in a near-constant state of insurgency.

Bannon is said to be exhausted and stretched. He is largely responsible for the relentless pace of initiatives and executive orders in the early weeks of the administration, because he doesn't expect to be in the White House for long. "I'm expecting to be fired by the summer," he has told friends, likening himself to Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's chief minister, who was instrumental in enforcing Britain's Reformation but ended up being beheaded by his boss. A source close to Bannon says that he may have "joked about being fired," but disagreed that Bannon is tired: "I don't think he even thinks in those terms. He is used to an intense schedule." His focus, the source says, "is working for the president to deliver on the promises to the American people for the first 100 days and then beyond on the overall agenda of Making America Great Again." Bannon returns Rebekah's phone calls when he can. But, according to someone who knows both well, "relations are strained." Another person who works with both of them says, "I think Bannon, once he finally built a relationship with Trump, didn't need Rebekah as much ... and he doesn't care about that. He only cares about the country." The source close to Bannon says that Rebekah and the chief strategist remain "close friends and allies."

As this piece was going to press, several sources warned me not to count Rebekah out. She still has a stake in Breitbart, which holds tremendous sway over Trump's base and has recently gone on a no-holds-barred offensive against the GOP health care plan. And on March 13, [Politico](#) reported that some Trump officials were already disillusioned with America First, which they felt had been slow to provide much-needed cover for his policy initiatives. There was talk of turning instead to a new group being launched by Rebekah Mercer. And so she may yet get another chance to realize her grand ambitions. "She's used to getting everything she wants, 100 percent of the time," says another person who knows her well. "Does she like getting 90 percent? No."