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COLUMNIST

Lincoln Wouldn't be Proud

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It has all the elements for a made for TV movie or even a mini-series perhaps. There is greed, sex, lies, backstabbing and secret lives.

Start with a small band of out of work and financially desperate political consultants, recruit a relatively obscure attorney who achieved notoriety and credibility by playing on his wife's role as a senior adviser in the office of the President.

Give it a name that exemplifies honesty, integrity and courage. Aha! The Lincoln Project! After all, any group with good old Honest Abe as its namesake must be legitimate.

Then, smooth talk the barking heads who populate the pundit class on cable television into booking them on their shows with the promise they would enthrall their viewers ridiculing President Trump while chuckling in tandem and mocking what they agreed were the intellectual deficiencies of his supporters.

These were, after all, consultants whose lives consisted of delivering clever sound bites, long on insults and lacking in substance.

It was all an elaborate con and, like all cons, success depended on a gullible mark eager to place personal aggrandizement above rational thought and unable to recognize they were being suckered.

The talk show hosts wanted so desperately to believe, they threw whatever journalistic integrity they possessed overboard and displayed none of the inherent skepticism that separates outstanding reporters from mediocre ones.

They deactivated their BS meters, disregarded whatever reservations they may have felt and were suckered by the political equivalent of fast-talking carnival hucksters.

The Lincoln Project principals played the media like a vintage Stradivarius.

It worked beyond its creators' wildest dreams.

Until it didn't.

Its implosion began with the revelation that one of the project's founders, John Weaver, a confidante and adviser to the late Sen. John McCain, had for years routinely propositioned young men for sexual liaisons with promises of employment.

The rodents jostled one another aside in their haste to abandon the sinking ship, expressing their shock at horror at Weaver's activities and disclaiming any knowledge of them, a contention quickly exposed as a lie.

The attorney in the group, George Conway, husband of former presidential counselor Kellyanne Conway, left the project last August, but when questioned about Weaver, insisted he didn't know him very well.

That he was a project co-founder with Weaver and had collaborated with him on an editorial page essay in the New York Times cut the ground from beneath Conway's assertion.

Attention turned from Weaver to a closer examination of the project's financial dealings and exposed the Lincoln Project for the scam it was.

Of the \$90 million it raised, only \$27 million was spent on television ads attacking Trump and other Republican candidates. The remainder — sans production and overhead — estimated at some \$50 million went into the pockets of the founders or was funneled to consulting firms which they controlled, an arrangement which guaranteed secrecy.

Rick Wilson, another co-founder, dismissed suggestions to disclose the funding and expenditures, arrogantly saying he would do so when Trump revealed his sources of funding since leaving office.

Wilson absurdly claimed further that the news accounts of the project's activities were hatched by Trump to divert attention from the impeachment proceedings and hide his role in the Jan. 6 assault on the U. S. Capitol.

In terms of success for the anti-Trump campaign, the project was a flop. None of the major candidates it supported and funded television ads in their behalf, managed to win.

The unraveling continued with the resignation of founder Steve Schmidt who, in a staggering bit of shameless chutzpah, said he stepped down to make way for greater diversity in the organization.

Schmidt is, perhaps, best known for his role in the 2008 presidential campaign of Sen. McCain and his decision to recruit former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as the vice-presidential candidate – one of the most egregious political blunders in presidential campaign history.

Schmidt, it was revealed, had sought a major role in the Trump campaign in 2016, but was rebuffed by the candidate who, it was reported, found him “untrustworthy.” It was one of the few moments of prescience exhibited by Trump.

As often occurs in times of crisis and controversy, the principals have turned on one another. Conway, responding to the leak of private e-mails from another founder, Jennifer Horn, warned his former colleagues and partners they had violated Federal law and could be held liable.

Horn, in her resignation, described a work environment riddled with demeaning, sexist and misogynistic behavior while her ex-partners responded by accusing her of attempting to shake them down for tens of thousands of dollars in fees and benefits.

Weaver was excoriated by his co-founders for his behavior, despite clear evidence they were aware of it months before the story broke.

While the entire episode was a seamy and sordid tale, it was also a scam worthy of Bernie Madoff.

And the media cannot escape its role in it.

The Lincoln Project was shamelessly promoted by talk show hosts for doing the work of the Lord to defeat Trump. The founders were featured on show after show as examples of righteous, high-minded, patriotic Americans dedicated to saving the nation from the evil president.

All of which, of course, produced even greater contributions to the project.

In the meantime, the founding principals laughed up their sleeves at the media while making their way to the bank.

It is unlikely any of principals will face criminal sanctions and the media will do its best to ignore its role in so eagerly providing a platform to them.

For some in the media, their chosen occupation means never having to say you're sorry.

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