

## Politics

# Shouting match erupts between Clinton and Trump aides

By [Karen Tumulty](#) and

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — The raw, lingering emotion of the 2016 presidential campaign erupted into a shouting match here Thursday as top strategists of Hillary Clinton’s campaign accused their Republican counterparts of fueling and legitimizing racism to elect Donald Trump.

The extraordinary exchange came at a postmortem session sponsored by Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, where top operatives from both campaigns sat across a conference table from each other.

As Trump’s team basked in the glow of its victory and singled out for praise its campaign’s chief executive, Stephen K. Bannon, who was absent, the row of grim-faced Clinton aides who sat opposite them bristled.

Clinton communications director Jennifer Palmieri condemned Bannon, who previously ran Breitbart, a news site popular with the alt-right, a small movement known for espousing racist views.

“If providing a platform for white supremacists makes me a brilliant tactician, I am proud to have lost,” she said. “I would rather lose than win the way you guys did.”

Kellyanne Conway, Trump’s campaign manager, fumed: “Do you think I ran a campaign where white supremacists had a platform?”

“You did, Kellyanne. You did,” interjected Palmieri, who choked up at various points of the session.

“Do you think you could have just had a decent message for white, working-class voters?” Conway asked.

“How about, it’s Hillary Clinton, she doesn’t connect with people? How about, they have nothing in common with her? How about, she doesn’t have an economic message?”

Joel Benenson, Clinton’s chief strategist, piled on: “There were dog whistles sent out to people. . . . Look at your rallies. He delivered it.”

At which point, Conway accused Clinton’s team of being sore losers. “Guys, I can tell you are angry, but wow,” she said. “Hashtag he’s your president. How’s that? Will you ever accept the election results? Will you tell

your protesters that he's their president, too?"

The session was part of a two-day forum that the school's Institute of Politics has sponsored in the wake of every presidential election since 1972. It gathers operatives from nearly all of the primary and general election campaigns, as well as a large contingent of journalists, with the stated goal of beginning to compile a historical record.

Generally, the quadrennial gatherings are frank but civil ones, in which political operatives at the top of their game accord each other a measure of professional respect.

This year, in the wake of a brutal campaign with a surprise outcome, it was clear that the wounds have not yet begun to heal. The animosity of the campaign aides mirrors the broader feelings of millions of voters on both sides.

Campaign officials lashed out at each other, and also against the media — which neither side believed had treated it fairly.

Clinton campaign manager Robby Mook also acknowledged that her operation had made a number of mistakes and miscalculations, while being buffeted by what he repeatedly described as a “head wind” of being an establishment candidate in a season where voters were eager for change.

He noted, for example, that younger voters, perhaps assuming that Clinton was going to win, migrated to third-party candidates in the final days of the race.

Where the campaign needed to win upward of 60 percent of young voters, it was able to garner something “in the high 50s at the end of the day,” Mook said. “That’s why we lost.”

He and others also faulted FBI Director James B. Comey for deciding in the waning days of the campaign to revive the controversy over Clinton’s use of a private email server.

Trump officials said Clinton’s problems went beyond tactics to her weaknesses as a candidate and the deficits of a message that consisted largely of trying to make Trump unacceptable.

David Bossie, Trump’s deputy campaign manager, taunted Mook: “You call it ‘head winds,’ I call it self-inflicted wounds.”

Conway added, “There’s a difference for voters between what offends you and what affects you,” arguing that Trump was speaking more directly to people’s anxieties and needs.

Strategists for Sen. Bernie Sanders (Vt.), who waged a strong challenge against Clinton for the Democratic nomination, agreed. “There was a large part of the Democratic primary electorate who had concerns about the secretary’s veracity and forthrightness,” said Jeff Weaver, Sanders’s campaign manager.

Clinton's campaign aides insisted, again and again, that their candidate had been held to a different standard than the other contenders — as evidenced by the controversy over her use of a private email server while secretary of state.

Palmieri said that many political journalists had a personal dislike for the Democratic nominee and predicted that the email issue will go down in history as “the most grossly overrated, over-covered and most destructive story in all of presidential politics.”

“If I made one mistake, it was legitimizing the way the press covered this story line,” Palmieri said.

Mook added that Trump deftly used his rally speeches to “switch up the news cycle.”

“The media by and large was not covering what Hillary Clinton was choosing to say,” Mook said. “They were treating her like the likely winner, and they were constantly trying to unearth secrets and expose.”

For instance, Mook posited that the media did not scrutinize Trump's refusal to release his tax returns as intensively as the issue of Clinton's private email server.

Conway retorted: “Oh, my God, that question was vomited to me every day on TV.”

The strangest criticism of the media, however, was by Trump's former campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski.

His complaint: Journalists accurately reported what Trump said.

“This is the problem with the media. You guys took everything that Donald Trump said so literally,” Lewandowski said. “The American people didn't. They understood it. They understood that sometimes — when you have a conversation with people, whether it's around the dinner table or at a bar — you're going to say things, and sometimes you don't have all the facts to back it up.”

At a dinner the previous evening, CNN chief executive Jeff Zucker was heckled during a panel discussion about the media by operatives from several losing Republican campaigns, who accused the network of showering Trump with free publicity.

To win the GOP nomination, Trump vanquished a highly credentialed field of 16 other Republicans, some of whom were backed up by tens of millions of dollars in outside spending. What his opponents failed to recognize, until it was too late, was that 2016 would be a year unlike any other, in which the standard rules would not apply.

“The uniqueness of this cycle made it such that some of those traditional kind of avenues became less effective,” said Danny Diaz, who managed the campaign of the presumed early front-runner, former Florida governor Jeb Bush.

“Money and mechanics matter, but passion about a candidate matters more,” added Mike DuHaime, a strategist for New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie (R), another establishment figure in the race.

Barry Bennett, the campaign manager for retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson, said of voters: “What they wanted more than anything else was strength, and Donald Trump was supplying it every day.”

Clinton consultant Mandy Grunwald had a darker interpretation, which she expressed in an icy backhanded compliment to the Trump team on Thursday: “I don’t think you give yourself enough credit for the negative campaign you ran.”

She noted that the murky corners of the Internet were rife with false stories that Clinton was in dire health, and on the verge of going to prison. “I hear this heroic story of him connecting with voters,” Grunwald said. “But there was a very impressive gassing of her.”


Benenson, meanwhile, served notice that the election may be over but that the battles it spawned are not.

“You guys won, that’s clear,” Benenson said. “But let’s be honest. Don’t act as if you have a popular mandate for your message. The fact of the matter is that more Americans voted for Hillary Clinton than for Donald Trump.”


At which point Conway turned to her side and said: “Hey, guys, we won. You don’t have to respond. He was the better candidate. That’s why he won.”

 **Comments**

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