US news

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Revealed: how a shadowy group of far-right donors is funding federal employee watchlists

Project 2025 architects are among those behind the American Accountability Foundation and their blacklists targeting people of color

Thomas Jones, seen here in Bardstown, Kentucky, on 18 June 2024, is president of the American Accountability Foundation. Photograph: Timothy D Easley/AP

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A rightwing non-profit group that has published a "DEI Watch List" identifying federal employees allegedly "driving radical Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives" is bankrolled by wealthy family foundations and rightwing groups whose origins are often cloaked in a web of financial arrangements that obscure the original donors.

One recent list created by the American Accountability Foundation (AAF) includes the names of mostly Black people with roles in government health alleged to have some ties to diversity initiatives. Another targets education department employees, and another calls out the "most subversive immigration bureaucrats".

The lists come amid turmoil in the US government as Donald Trump's incoming administration, aided by Elon Musk, the world's richest man, has sought to fire huge swathes of the federal government and purge it of DEI and other initiatives - such as tackling climate change - that Trump has dubbed "woke".

While the publication of the personal details of government workers - whom the website describes as "targets" - has reportedly "terrified" many in federal departments, the Guardian has discovered that some current and former employees of AAF have taken pains to conceal their affiliations with the group on LinkedIn and other public websites.

One of the donors to the AAF is the Heritage Foundation, the architects of Project 2025, which has been a driving ideological force behind Trump's re-election and first weeks in government.

Heidi Beirich, the chief strategy officer of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism (GPAHE), said: "It's not surprising to find a vile project such as this backed by Project 2025 entities and far-right donors who have it out for public employees."

Disclosure documents show that the AAF has been closely involved in training Republican staffers in collaboration with the affiliated Conservative Partnership Institute, in sessions that promise to train rightwing operatives in skills including "open source research" and "working with outside groups".

Funding fear

Significant sums come to AAF via “dark money” donor-advised funds, which obscure the original benefactors by design.

In the most recent filings for large donor-advised funds, AAF received $25,000 via the Goldman Sachs Charitable Fund; $16,750 via the National Christian Charitable Fund; and $22,300 via the Fidelity Investments Charitable Gift Fund.

But other donors are named private foundations, some of which also donated to affiliated organizations including the Conservative Partnership Institute (CPI).

In 2022, for example, the Dunn Foundation gifted $250,000 to CPI and $25,000 to AAF. In 2023, the same foundation gave AAF another $25,000 and upped its CPI donation to $2.5m.

In 2023, the WL Amos Sr Foundation handed $10,000 to AAF, $55,000 to CPI-affiliated American Moment, and $300,000 to CPI, along with another $200,000 to Project 2025’s architects at the Heritage Foundation.

The Guardian emailed Foundation Source, listed as the administrator of the Dunn Foundation in filings, and William Amos III, who is listed as president of the WL Amos Sr Foundation, to ask about their donations and whether they approved of AAF’s style of political advocacy.

The Guardian also emailed others listed as officers or trustees of other family foundations that have made substantial donations to AAF, including Tina Kimbrough, executive director of the Nord Family Foundation; and Hallie McFetridge, a trustee of the Quinn Family Foundation.

Only Quinn’s McFetridge responded, saying: “As we are a family foundation, different members of the family are able to make gifts as their conscious dictates. Another member of our family made this particular donation.”

She added that she would pass the Guardian’s questions on to that person but that “I can assure you I would find this absolutely intolerable. I strongly disagree with this approach to political advocacy.”

Other heavyweight conservative groups have pitched in for AAF.

AAF was one of two organizations to receive direct grants in 2023 from the Club for Growth Foundation. That foundation is co-located and affiliated with a family of non-profits and political committees including Club for Growth Action and Club For Growth PAC, which channel money to conservative causes and candidates from billionaire mega-donors Jeff Yass, Richard Uihlein and their affiliates.

According to tax filings, in 2023 AAF also received $50,000 from The 85 Fund, which is one among a network of organizations funded by Leonard Leo, the conservative mega-donor and Federalist Society mastermind.

Although 2024 filings for AAF are not yet available, last June the organization reportedly also received $100,000 from Heritage for a project whose "goal is to post 100 names of government workers to a website this summer to show a potential new administration who might be standing in the way of a second-term Trump agenda".

'Incubated' by the Conservative Partnership Institute

The most crucial support for AAF, however, has come from the organization that birthed it: the CPI, which continues to have a profound influence on the Trump administration and the Republican party as a whole via its own activities and those of its flotilla of spin-off groups.

AAF was founded in 2021 to "take a big handful of sand and throw it in the gears of the Biden administration", as Tom Jones, the organization's head, told Fox News at the time.

In 2021 and 2022, however, CPI's filings indicate that it was the "directly controlling entity" for the "related tax-exempt organization" AAF, and that CPI funded AAF to the tune of $335,100 in 2021 and $210,000 in 2022.

This was the period in which a well-heeled CPI was incubating a "network of closely affiliated think tanks, legal groups, and training centers dedicated to the thorough makeover of the federal government", according to the Nation.

That network included America First Legal (AFL), the Center for Renewing America (CRA), the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP) and American Moment, along with AAF.

All of these groups were on the advisory board for Project 2025, and most have placed personnel at the highest levels of the new Trump administration.

AFL's Stephen Miller is Trump's deputy chief of staff for policy; CRA's Russell Vought is poised to be confirmed as head of the office of management and budget; and in a little-reported move, Trump placed American Moment's founder, Saurabh Sharma, as special assistant in the presidential personnel office.

Moulding Maga minds

The Guardian reported last year that CPI had been cementing ties between the far right and the GOP by means of training events for Hill staffers and their bosses in Congress

Many of these events were held at "Camp Rydin", a sprawling 2,200-acre (890-hectare) property on Maryland's eastern shore purchased after a $25m donation was made to CPI by its namesake, retired Houston software entrepreneur Mike Rydin, in the wake of January 6.

Others were held at one of at least nine adjacent properties on Washington DC's Pennsylvania Avenue purchased by CPI since 2022, in what reports described as a $41m "shopping spree" that has created a "Maga campus".

CPI literature describes the precinct as "Patriot's Row".

Records obtained from US Senate and House ethics disclosures indicate that AAF has benefited from being front and center at many of these events.

At a 29 May 2024 "Legislative Assistant Symposium" attended by staffers then working for senators including Josh Hawley, Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz and JD Vance, AAF's Jones was billed as speaking on "strategies for how Congress should approach oversight and accountability", alongside speakers from CPI, AFL, Advancing American Freedom and anti-immigrant group NumbersUSA.

A parallel event with the same line-up drew staffers for hard-right Maga representatives including Anna Paulina Luna - who recently introduced a bill that would see Trump's face added to Mount Rushmore - and Paul Gosar, who in November invoked antisemitic conspiracy theories in a newsletter defending Tulsi Gabbard, Trump's pick to lead national intelligence.

NumbersUSA was part of a network of groups "founded and funded" by John Tanton, whom the Southern Poverty Law Center called the "puppeteer of the nativism movement and a man with deep racist roots".

At an event held 15-17 February 2023, hosted by AAF and attended by staffers for Congress members including Luna, Ken Buck and Marjorie Taylor Greene, trainees were to learn skills including "how to effectively draft requests for information from agencies and witnesses", "tools and techniques for conducting open source research into agencies, individuals, and organizations", and conducting "mock interviews with reluctant / recalcitrant witnesses".

AAF's reticent researchers

Prior to AAF, Jones worked as a Capitol Hill staffer for a string of high-profile hard-right Republicans including Ron Johnson, Cruz and the former senator Jim DeMint, who headed up CPI after he was forced out in an internal power struggle at Heritage.

Since opening his AAF unit, he has blooded a new generation of rightwing opposition researchers. Some of those researchers appear reluctant to publicly advertise their affiliation.

On LinkedIn, four people openly flag their affiliation with AAF: Jones himself; communications manager Yitz Friedman of Brooklyn, New York; development adviser Nadeen Wincapaw of Tampa, Florida; and associate researcher Elisabeth Guinard of Helena, Montana.

Search engine-cached versions of the LinkedIn page of Jerome Trankle of Washington DC, however, indicate that he is research director at AAF. Data brokers also yield an AAF-associated email address for Tankle.

Trankle's live LinkedIn profile has him doing "ESG & Financial Services" research at "AAF" without using the badged - and searchable - link some of his colleagues use.

The Guardian emailed the address associated with Trankle at AAF to ask why he doesn't more clearly advertise his affiliation but received no response.

Additionally, an anti-fascist research group claimed late on Wednesday to have identified additional researchers on the basis of LinkedIn profile pictures that had inadvertently been included in purposed evidentiary materials about government workers on the DEI Watch List site.

The Guardian corroborated the inclusion of researchers' profile pictures in evidence on the DEI watchlist.

One of those identified, Cari Fike, is married to Hugh Fike, a senior director at CPI, and is a former lobbyist for Heritage Action, the 501(c)4 associated with the Heritage Foundation.

The Guardian contacted Fike for comment on her apparent involvement in researching government workers for AAF.

Beirich, the extremism expert, said: "It's rather ironic that an organization that is targeting public officials through a watchlist that could open them up

to harassment and mistreatment goes to such lengths to protect its own," adding: "Clearly, they understand how dangerous this outing can be."

Dirt machine

The dirt machine now targeted at government workers was honed on higher-profile targets during the Biden administration.

Early on, AAF pointed its opposition-research machine at Biden nominees including Saule Omarova, nominated for comptroller of the currency; Sarah Bloom Raskin, nominated for vice-chair for supervision of the Federal Reserve Board, and Ketanji Brown Jackson, supreme court justice, whom the organization falsely claimed had been soft on sex offenders.

In the process of "desperately seeking dirt" on the Federal Reserve nominee Lisa Cook, AAF used a customary tactic of peppering her employer, Michigan State University, with records requests. But Jones went one step further by bombarding "dozens" of her colleagues in a bid to cast doubt on her tenure promotion a decade earlier.

A significant proportion of the nominees targeted by AAF - including Brown Jackson, Cook and Omarova - were women of color.

The dozens of public employees whose information was collected in "dossiers" on the DEI watchlist site are overwhelmingly people of color. Of 44 profiles listed under agencies at the time of reporting, 29 were people of color, and 20 were women of color alone. Just five were white men.

"The fact that many on the list are people of color just adds another layer of vileness to the project," Beirich said.

"Recent attacks by the Trump administration on public employees shows that the Maga/Project 2025 movement will go as far as possible to make life miserable for public servants."

This article was amended on 10 February 2025. An earlier version incorrectly stated that employees of Foundation Source act as trustees for the Dunn Foundation; rather Foundation Source acts as an administrator. A spokesperson said after publication that Foundation Source "does not recommend (or decide) specific organizations for its clients to fund", and that it has no affiliation with the CPI or AAF.

It also clarified that Jeff Yass and Richard Uihlein have not contributed to the Club for Growth Foundation.