

PRICE \$8.99

THE

MAY 30, 2016

NEW YORKER



STING OF MYSELF

Amateurish spies like James O'Keefe III attempt to sway the 2016 campaign.

BY JANE MAYER



AS DANA GERAGHTY recalls it, March 16th was a "rather quiet Wednesday." That afternoon, she was in her cubicle at the Open Society Foundations, on West Fifty-seventh Street, where she helps oversee the nonprofit group's pro-democracy programs in Eurasia. The Foundations are the philanthropic creation of George Soros, the hedge-fund billionaire, who is a prominent donor to liberal causes, including Hillary Clinton's Presidential bid. Soros, who has spent nineteen million dollars on the 2016 Presidential campaign, is regarded with suspicion by many conservatives. *National Review* has suggested that he

may be fomenting protests against Donald Trump by secretly funding what it called a "rent-a-mob." Geraghty, who is twenty-eight, had programmed her office phone to forward messages from unfamiliar callers to her e-mail inbox. She was about to review several messages when she noticed that one of them was extraordinarily long. "Who leaves a seven-minute voice mail?" Geraghty asked herself. She clicked on it.

"Hey, Dana," a voice began. The caller sounded to her like an older American male. "My name is, uh, Victor Kesh. I'm a Hungarian-American who represents a, uh, foundation . . . that would like to

get involved with you and aid what you do in fighting for, um, European values." He asked Geraghty for the name of someone he could talk to "about supporting you guys and coordinating with you on some of your efforts." Requesting a callback, he left a phone number with a 914 area code—Westchester County.

She heard a click, a pause, and then a second male voice. The person who had introduced himself as Kesh said, "Don't say anything . . . before I hang up the phone."

"That piqued my interest," Geraghty recalls. Other aspects of the message puzzled her: "Who says they're with a foundation without saying which one? He sounded scattered. And usually people call to *get* funding, not to offer it." Victor Kesh, she suspected, was "someone passing as someone else."

She continued to listen, and the man's voice suddenly took on a more commanding tone. The caller had failed to hang up, and Kesh, unaware that he was still being recorded, seemed to be conducting a meeting about how to perpetrate an elaborate sting on Soros. "What needs to happen," he said, is for "someone other than me to make a hundred phone calls like that"—to Soros, to his employees, and to the Democracy Alliance, a club of wealthy liberal political donors that Soros helped to found, which is expected to play a large role in financing this year's campaigns. Kesh described sending into the Soros offices an "undercover" agent who could "talk the talk" with Open Society executives. Kesh's goal wasn't fully spelled out on the recording, but the gist was that an operative posing as a potential donor could penetrate Soros's operation and make secret videos that exposed embarrassing activities. Soros, he assured the others, has "thousands of organizations" on the left in league with him. Kesh said that the name of his project was Discover the Networks.

The money that would be offered, Kesh said, couldn't come from "offshore British Virgin Island companies," because "Soros's people don't want to take money from a group like that." He claimed that "Bill Clinton would" take suspect cash, "and Hillary Clinton would, and Chelsea would."

One member of the team suggested to Kesh that he knew someone who could infiltrate the Soros network: an

O'Keefe's signature method is to entrap targets into breaking the law.

English orthopedic surgeon with “a real heavy British accent,” who was in the U.S. and was “more than happy to do anything he can do for us.” The surgeon was sophisticated about technology and would not “have any problem with the cameras.” The team member said, “He’s a very talented guy, so, I mean, he’ll be able to pull it off.” As Kesh mapped out the covert attack, however, he had no idea that the only person he was stinging was himself.

The accidental recording reached farcical proportions when Kesh announced that he was opening Geraghty’s LinkedIn page on his computer. He planned to check her résumé and leverage the information to penetrate the Soros “octopus.” Kesh said, “She’s probably going to call me back, and if she doesn’t I can create other points of entry.” Suddenly, Kesh realized that by opening Geraghty’s LinkedIn page he had accidentally revealed his own LinkedIn identity to her. (LinkedIn can let users see who has looked at their pages.) “Whoa!” an accomplice warned. “Log out!” The men anxiously reassured one another that no one checks their LinkedIn account anyway. “It was a little chilling to hear this group of men talking about me as a ‘point of entry,’” Geraghty says. “But—not to sound ageist—it was clear that these people were not used to the technology.”

Geraghty forwarded the voice-mail recording to Chris Stone, the president of the Open Society Foundations. “The Watergate burglars look good compared to these guys,” Stone told me last month. “These guys can’t even figure out how to use an Internet browser, let alone conduct an undercover operation. You read the transcript and you can’t help but laugh.” He went on, “But the issues here aren’t funny. There’s some kind of dirty-tricks operation in play against us.”

IN THE WESTCHESTER COUNTY suburb of Mamaroneck, a street-level office has reflective glass doors and windows that make it impossible to see inside. This is the headquarters of James O’Keefe III—the conservative activist who placed the phony phone call pretending to be Victor Kesh. As he showed me around, in late April, O’Keefe, who is thirty-one, told me that he is not a dirty trickster but an investigative journalist and a leading practitioner of mod-

ern political warfare. “We’ve got this guerrilla army, and it’s coming to fruition soon,” he said. “This is our base of operations.” Waving his hand around seven thousand square feet of empty office space, he said, “This is our NORAD. It’s our field operation.”

The back wall of the office, he explained, would soon be hung with an enormous corkboard covered with maps. Affixed to each map would be a card with the location and the assumed name of every undercover political operative working for his nonprofit, Project Veritas. Created in 2010 as a charity that could accept tax-deductible contributions, Project Veritas says on its Web site that it is dedicated to exposing “corruption, dishonesty, self-dealing, waste, fraud, and other misconduct.”

O’Keefe graduated from Rutgers University in 2006. He says that a professor there, David Knowlton, urged him to follow Saul Alinsky’s rule book, which advised radicals to use their enemies’ rules against them. On St. Patrick’s Day in 2005, O’Keefe lampooned campus political correctness by demanding that the dining hall ban Lucky Charms cereal. The box’s depiction of a leprechaun, he proclaimed, perpetuated “offensive” stereotypes about Irish-Americans. He videotaped a confrontation that he’d had with a school administrator and posted the footage on YouTube, launching his career as a political stunt artist. The Lucky Charms prank remains “a crowd favorite,” O’Keefe told me.

In 2014, his organization became more directly involved in electoral politics, sprouting a “social welfare” limb called the Project Veritas Action Fund. Such organizations, referred to in the tax code as 501c4 groups, have proliferated since 2010, when the Supreme Court’s ruling in the Citizens United case essentially legalized unlimited corporate and individual spending on politics. Unlike ordinary charities, 501c4 groups can accept unlimited contributions from secret donors and spend the cash directly on campaigns. They just need to make a plausible case that they promote social welfare and that politics is not their primary purpose. O’Keefe says that the new group “allows us to literally put someone undercover in a campaign.”

In the era of “dark money,” as anonymous political donations are often de-

scribed, Project Veritas has been thriving. According to its federal tax filings, between 2013 and 2014 its budget doubled, from \$1.2 million to \$2.4 million. O’Keefe told me that he has “about a dozen undercover operations ongoing at any given time.” One of these, he said, involves “someone working for Hillary Clinton full time, as a paid staffer.” This “embedded” operative, he said, “is employed in the campaign in the highest echelons.” (He declined to be more specific.) Every day, the operative sends “video to us over our own server.” He added, “Just like Hillary Clinton, we have our own Internet server in Westchester County!” He went on, “We see *everything*. We have thousands of hours of video. You’ll see infighting, plans, strategy.” O’Keefe said that he has been compiling a feature film from the operative’s footage, but won’t release it until the late summer or fall, when it will have maximum impact. In the meantime, he has posted teasers online; several of the clips end with the words “Stay tuned, Hillary, and check your e-mail.”

O’Keefe promised that footage he has acquired through his various operatives “will force people to resign.” He later added that he had video of “top, top, top-ranking officials discussing how and why they commit” voter fraud “to sway races.”

Given O’Keefe’s track record, it would be a mistake to take his grand statements too seriously. He first gained wide notoriety in 2009, when he released a series of undercover videos attacking the liberal community-organizing group ACORN. The videos had an immediate effect, but raised serious questions about his methods and ethics—questions that have trailed him ever since. He secretly filmed encounters in which he and a female colleague showed up at ACORN offices in various cities, claiming to be a pimp and an underage prostitute who wanted advice on how to make prostitution look like a legal business. ACORN officials appeared to oblige them, in one instance advising them to make sure that the immigrants O’Keefe claimed he was going to prostitute actually went to school as exchange students. After O’Keefe began releasing his exposés of ACORN, the House of Representatives voted to cut off federal funds to the group, which soon collapsed. But an ACORN official

filmed in California, who was fired because he seemed to embrace the proposed scheme, successfully settled a lawsuit against O'Keefe for a hundred thousand dollars. He argued that he had not consented to be videotaped, as is required in California, and that after learning about the prostitution idea he had called the police. O'Keefe hadn't bothered to contact the employee before airing the damning footage.

In January, 2010, the F.B.I. arrested O'Keefe and three accomplices, two of whom had disguised themselves as telephone repairmen in order to enter the New Orleans office of Mary Landrieu, then a Democratic senator for Louisiana. (O'Keefe says he had hoped to disprove Landrieu's claim that her phone lines were too clogged to answer the many angry calls coming from Tea Party activists.) O'Keefe was sentenced to three years of probation and a hundred hours of community service; he also paid a fifteen-hundred-dollar fine.

In 2011, O'Keefe embarrassed National Public Radio when two accomplices, pretending to represent a radical Muslim group, proposed to donate five million dollars to the network in exchange for favorable programming about Islam. After O'Keefe released videos depicting two NPR employees chatting with the undercover operatives about the need to put Muslim voices on the air, and criticizing the Republican Party as "not just Islamophobic but really xenophobic," two top NPR officials, including its chief executive, Vivian Schiller, resigned.

Many O'Keefe operations, however, have fallen flat, including his repeated efforts to prove that voter-identity fraud is pervasive. "It seems like most of the fraud O'Keefe uncovers he commits himself," Richard Hasen, a professor of election law at the University of California, Irvine, says. A sting aimed at Hillary Clinton last year was considered especially feeble. Veritas operatives persuaded a staffer at a rally to accept a Canadian citizen's money in exchange for a Hillary T-shirt—a petty violation of the ban on foreign political contributions. Brian Fallon, the communications director for the Clinton campaign, says, "Project Veritas has been repeatedly caught trying to commit fraud, falsify identities, and break campaign-finance law. It is not surprising, given that their founder has already

been convicted for efforts like this."

O'Keefe's unseemly tactics have increasingly caused other conservatives, including Glenn Beck, to distance themselves from him. But the 2016 campaign cycle appears to be reinvigorating the political art form that Richard Nixon's operative Donald Segretti infamously called "ratfucking."

The use of deception and other subversive tactics to undermine voter choice is as old as the American republic. Thomas Jefferson enlisted surrogates to publish attacks on Alexander Hamilton, who responded with anonymous ripostes. In the eighteen-seventies, cities were infamous for using ballots printed on multi-ply tissue paper in order to multiply candidates' votes. In 1972, Segretti published a phony letter that he claimed had been written by one of Nixon's rivals, the Democratic Presidential candidate Edmund Muskie. The letter slurred Canadians as "Canucks," and the resulting furor sent Muskie's campaign into a tailspin.

With cash streaming into dark-money groups, negative campaigning is a growth industry. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, and the author of "Dirty Politics" (1992), told me, "Dirty tricks have always been covert operations. But more money means it's more possible to cover your tracks in ways that make it insidious." Over the years, Jamieson says, opposing campaigns have attempted to sabotage one another by planting scandalous material, releasing doctored photographs, and undertaking sting operations. In 2008, a "citizen journalist" attended a private San Francisco fund-raiser and posted a video of President Barack Obama making a maladroitness reference to embittered Americans who "cling to guns or religion." Four years later, a bartender working at a private fund-raiser for Mitt Romney recorded him dismissing forty-seven per cent of the electorate as free-loaders "dependent upon government." Afterward, Romney could not shake the perception that he was elitist.

According to Jamieson, the ability to download videos from smartphones directly onto the Internet has normalized what used to be shadowy practices. "In the past, you were the uncredited hero who got the candidate elected," she says. "Now the brazenness of the process is

such that you will admit it and put it on your résumé!"

The expected contest between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton is likely to be one of the nastiest in history, with putatively independent "opposition research" operations fuelling both parties. Meanwhile, negative campaigns funded by private donors and private interests are aiming at targets far beyond conventional candidates—among them intellectuals who have no official role.

O'KEEFE DECLINED to tell me why he had targeted George Soros. But Matthew Tyrmand, a recent addition to the Project Veritas board, has publicly declared his fierce opposition to Soros. Tyrmand is a thirty-five-year-old Polish-American investor who is an informal adviser to Poland's right-wing nationalist government as well as a contributing writer at Breitbart, the conservative news site. As street protests have sprung up in Poland, Tyrmand has repeatedly suggested online that Soros is stoking the unrest. On the Web site of the Polonia Institute, a nonprofit that promotes Polish culture, he wrote that the "recent protest movement" was "rumored to be funded by George Soros's Open Society Foundations" in order to "undermine and destabilize the new government."

Tyrmand deflected numerous requests for an interview. When I finally reached him by phone, he said that he was too busy to talk. He was in France, on his way to the Cannes Film Festival for the premiere of "Clinton Cash," a film adaptation of a scathing 2015 book by Peter Schweizer, a fellow at the Hoover Institution, which accuses the Clintons of enriching themselves by giving speeches to dubious sponsors. The film, along with other independently financed attacks on the Clintons, will significantly help Trump's campaign by reducing its need to spend money on oppo research.

The first time I asked O'Keefe who Victor Kesh was, he declined to comment on what he called "investigations, real or imagined." But, after learning that he had been caught on tape trying to infiltrate Soros's group, he tried to put the best face on it. On May 11th, he, Tyrmand, and a cameraman showed up in the lobby of the Open Society Foundations, saying that they were conducting

a serious investigation. O'Keefe phoned Dana Geraghty again, admitting that he had previously called her "posing as Victor," and said that he had some "follow-up questions" about whether the Foundations were as transparent as they claim to be about the activities they fund. With the camera rolling, O'Keefe and his team stood outside the lobby and buttonholed people, asking them if Soros was funding Polish street protests.

Laura Silber, the chief communications officer for the Open Society Foundations, told me, "We were asked if we fund the Polish opposition—we don't, directly or indirectly. We do support groups that advance the rule of law and human rights, which are under threat in Poland today."

O'KEEFE PORTRAYS HIMSELF as a rigorous journalist who is dedicated to furthering "a more ethical and transparent society." He refuses, however, to be transparent about who is funding him. According to tax records obtained by PRWatch.org, an investigative watchdog group run by the Center for Media and Democracy, in recent years hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations to Project Veritas have come through a fund in Alexandria, Virginia, called Donors Trust, which specializes in hiding the money trails of conservative philanthropists. In its promotional materials, Donors Trust says that it will "keep your charitable giving private, especially gifts funding sensitive or controversial issues." The records obtained by PRWatch.org also show that one donor, a conservative political activist in Wisconsin, contributed fifty thousand dollars just before Project Veritas undertook a sting of one of his political enemies—a state senator.

O'Keefe, when asked if donors to his group can pay for him to investigate particular people or groups, answered, "It depends." He will pursue a requested target "if it's an idea I want to do, or if it advances our mission." But he added, "Not many people can tell me what to do, because they don't know how we do it."

As O'Keefe's budget has grown, so has his ambition. "I want to expand to every state," he told me. "I want to be everywhere." If uncovering the truth requires deception, fake names, disguises, and other subterfuge, he makes no apology. The signature O'Keefe method is

to try to entrap his subjects into breaking the law—a strategy that most political operatives consider a step too far.

He showed me a tiny video camera that had been hidden inside an Aquafina water bottle, and others embedded in a wristwatch and in an iPod Shuffle. A device in his shirt button, which used Bluetooth technology, could relay live audio to his control room. He argued, "What I do is the truest form of journalism there is. We hit the record but-



ton and show people what we found."

The political left also outsources much of its dirty work to privately funded super PACs and dark-money groups. After the Democrats were eviscerated in the 2010 midterm elections—the first congressional campaigns after the Citizens United decision—an independently funded group named American Bridge 21st Century began supplying opposition research to Democratic groups and candidates. The network was founded by David Brock, a self-described former "conservative hit man" who became notorious in the early nineties for having described Anita Hill as "a little bit nutty and a little bit slutty." In the aughts, Brock, who is gay, joined the Democratic Party—in part because he found the Republican Party homophobic—bringing with him an insider's expertise in cutthroat politics. He describes American Bridge, which employs a hundred and fifty people, as a political "utility" for progressives.

The American Bridge network includes Media Matters, a watchdog operation that identifies what it sees as distortions by the right-wing press, and Correct the Record, a rapid-response unit that focusses on defending Hillary Clinton. Brock's group also oversees political action committees, dark-money nonprofit organizations, and at least fifty video "trackers," who hound Republican candidates in the hope of recording politically damaging moments. Video track-

ers have been mainstays of campaigns since 2006, when a Democratic volunteer upended George Allen, the Republican gubernatorial candidate in Virginia, by releasing a video of him uttering a racist slur. In 2012, one of the trackers with Brock's organization captured Todd Akin, a Missouri Republican running for the Senate, defending "legitimate rape." With American Bridge's success has come funding, largely from labor unions and wealthy liberals. One of the biggest contributors this year is George Soros—which may help explain why he was the object of an O'Keefe sting.

AFTER MITT ROMNEY lost the 2012 Presidential election, conservative operatives concluded that they needed their own putatively independent negative-campaign machine. Out of this partisan arms race grew America Rising—the unofficial oppo-research affiliate of the Republican Party—which was founded in 2013 by Matt Rhoades, the former head of Romney's campaign. Based in Arlington, Virginia, it diverges from Brock's network in one crucial respect: It is a limited-liability corporation. Instead of relying on charitable and political donations, America Rising serves as a for-profit vender to conservative clients, who pay it to conduct customized negative research.

Rhoades and others declined to respond to interview requests, but when I stopped by America Rising's headquarters, on May 18th, the office was filled with young researchers bent over their laptops. The walls were decorated with photographs of conservative icons (though Trump's portrait seemed to be missing). An office door was covered with bullseye targets, and a sign reminded staffers of the "Research Checklist: Nexis, Google Alerts, Facebook, Twitter."

Brock told me that his group had rejected the vender model. "We didn't want to be under clients' thumbs," he said. "If you work for them, you're subservient. We wanted to build an independent progressive infrastructure." Recently, some donors wanted video trackers to trail the Koch brothers, but Brock turned them down. American Bridge does a huge amount of oppo research on the Kochs, but Brock says he believes that tracking private citizens is unethical. He claims that he has also

rejected the use of subterfuge. "We're not in that game," he says.

By contrast, in late April the dark-money arm of Rhoades's group, America Rising Squared, announced the creation of a negative campaign to target leading environmentalists as well as prominent donors to environmental causes and candidates. The campaign's initial budget was a hundred thousand dollars, which, among other things, would cover the extensive use of video trackers. According to the political tip sheet *The Hill*, the campaign would subject environmentalists to "the same level of scrutiny . . . that opposition research firms apply to presidential candidates." America Rising Squared's executive director, Brian Rogers, told *The Hill* that his group planned to hold "the Environmentalist Left accountable for their epic hypocrisy and extreme positions which threaten America's future prosperity."

Almost simultaneously, in early May, the organization announced the launch of an affiliated venture, run by many of the same operatives, called Definers Public Affairs. Definers offers to wage political-style negative campaigns, for profit, on behalf of undisclosed private clients, including corporations. According to its Web site, Definers will "create dossiers" on opponents, monitor them from a "full-service war room," and build both "grassroots" alliances and "a paid online presence." This raises the possibility that undisclosed business interests are paying to choose the targets they want Republican operatives to attack.

Soon after the campaign against environmentalists was announced, Bill McKibben, who teaches environmental studies at Middlebury College, in Vermont, got an alarming phone call from a librarian at Texas Tech University, in Lubbock, who supervises a literary archive to which McKibben had contributed his research papers. McKibben has been an outspoken activist against the Keystone XL pipeline, and in 2008 he co-founded 350.org, a "global grassroots climate movement." For many years, he was a staff writer for this magazine. (He is now a regular contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, where he recently reviewed a book of mine.) He is a political thinker, but not a candidate, a major political donor, or a paid campaign operative.

The Texas librarian, Diane Warner, told McKibben that a man had shown up at the archive and requested copies of all his papers—fifty-four boxes of documents. The man identified himself as Aaron Goss, and said that he worked for Definers Public Affairs. Goss spent a week copying pages from McKibben's archive. Meanwhile, as McKibben was getting ready to speak about the environment at a church in Durham, New Hampshire, an unfamiliar man aimed a video camera at him. The next day, a wordless two-second snippet of footage appeared online, showing McKibben looking at the camera and then turning away uncomfortably, to the accompaniment of the song "Show Me That Smile." The video, which was titled "Bill McKibben: Ready for His Closeup," was posted to the Twitter account of Corenews.org.

The site is another recent creation of America Rising Squared, as is an app called Grill, which enables users to track the location of ideological enemies, including Hillary Clinton, and lists hostile questions to ask at public events, such as "Will you drop out of the Presidential race if you are indicted?" Within days, another contentless video snippet of McKibben popped up, this time showing him in Australia. The threat was clear: wherever he went, his enemies would be recording him.

Who paid for a professional opposition-research team to mock an environmental activist? The answer is secret. One could argue that the campaign isn't substantially different from that of a corporate lobbyist, but, unlike registered lobbyists, America Rising Squared doesn't have to file public disclosures or pay taxes, because it purports to be a social-welfare organization.

McKibben told me, "I have no fear of debating these people on the issues, but this is just intimidation." He added, "It's bad enough to do this to anyone who runs for office. But to do it to anyone who dares protest?"

Tom Steyer, the retired hedge-fund billionaire who runs the environmental-action group NextGen Climate and has been one of the Democratic Party's biggest donors, is another target of America Rising Squared. Corenews.org has featured posts calling Steyer hypocritical, because he made a fortune investing

in fossil fuels. America Rising Squared has accused him of self-interest in supporting green energy, as he has substantial investments in solar power. Steyer says that this is "complete and utter nonsense," because his investments are held by trusts and structured in a way that any profits are transferred to charity. "They have to know they're lying," Steyer said. "It's completely dishonest, unethical, and pitiful. And it's creepy." He says that the anonymously funded attacks won't stop him, but he worries that such campaigns may deter others from engaging in activism. As he puts it, they "are another reason people are reluctant to get involved in politics."

IT MAY BE that the shock value of such exposés is diminishing. A recent series of sting videos against Planned Parenthood, created by a group called the Center for Medical Progress, involved deceptions so devious—including an attempt by undercover operatives to buy fetal tissue—that the campaign backfired. Pro-choice activists united in anger at the sting's perpetrators, and a Texas grand jury cleared Planned Parenthood of wrongdoing and indicted the C.M.P. In Presidential politics, gaffes may be less damaging. As Brock notes, "In the year of Trump, people are more inured to the outrageous."

O'Keefe promises that his covert documentary of the Hillary Clinton campaign will command attention. But on May 19th he publicly conceded defeat in the Open Society Foundations investigation. In an interview posted on Breitbart News, he confessed that he had "been forced to abandon an ambitious undercover investigation into billionaire left-wing financier George Soros." O'Keefe acknowledged that he "forgot to hang up" the phone, but declined to be more specific about the operation, saying, "I don't like to reveal the tactics of what we do." He apologized to his supporters and promised that his many other investigations had not been compromised. "Unfortunately, I'm burned on this particular investigation," he said, adding that he was "very disappointed," because he believes that the influence of billionaires such as Soros is "the most important topic undermining democracy." But he concluded, "If I wanted to be perfect, I would give up." ♦