Thursday, July 11, 2024 / What is Project 2025?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWRAM (host): Back in early April, Noel brought you an episode of *Today, Explained* about something called Project 2025.

SCORING IN <The Endless Maze (BMC)>

*NOEL: The conservative Heritage Foundation ALSO has a plan for a Trump presidency. 887 pages. A little less State Fair, a little more, and I quote, “deleting the word abortion from every piece of legislation that exists.”*

SEAN: Maybe you heard the episode? But maybe you didn’t.

Because in the past few weeks, we’ve been getting emails from you, and DMs from you, and texts from you. And they’re all saying the same thing:  
   
 ANDI: You guys need to do a show about Project 2025!

SEAN: Maybe we were too on the ball! Ahead of the times. Whatever it is, or was, we’re bringing you an encore presentation. Joe Biden wants you to Google it. Donald Trump would prefer you didn’t. Taraji P. Henson warned you about it at the BET Awards.

*<CLIP> TARAJI P. HENSON: The Project 2025 plan is not a game. Look it up!*

SEAN: Project 2025: ahead on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

*<BUMPER> Explained. 2024 Explained.*

NOEL: I’m Noel King, with Shelby Talcott, who’s covering the 2024 presidential election for Semafor. These days Shelby has been writing a lot about Project 2025.

SHELBY TALCOTT (politics reporter, Semafor): It's essentially this massive, organized, multimillion dollar effort to establish an administration in waiting for Donald Trump.

SCORING IN <Crafty Sneakers (c) - APM>

SHELBY: It's headed up by the Heritage Foundation, which is a conservative think tank that has been really instrumental in conservative policies throughout the years. When I talked to the project's head last year for this, he said that what fundamentally unites our coalition is deconstructing the administrative state.

*<CLIP> Paul Dans, director of the 2025 Presidential Transition Project at The Heritage Foundation: Our common theme is to take down the administrative state, the bureaucracy and you're gonna, um yeah. <applause> It's, it's not as easy done as it is said. The bottom line is that we need to have an army of conservatives ready to march in day one.*

SHELBY: The way that they're trying to do this is through this multipronged, years-long initiative that involves vetting a number of staffers that theoretically could be in the next Trump administration. It involves making sure that those staffers know how government works, so training them. It involves this massive 800-plus-page policy book that essentially outlines the major conservative policies of today. And then the last prong is, of course, diving into this 180-day playbook that Project 2025 is currently developing to hand Donald Trump, should he win in 2024, that he could implement initiatives, executive orders and policies, in his first year in office.

*<CLIP> Paul Dans: We are gonna be prepared, day one, January 20, 2025, to hit the ground running as conservatives, to really help the next president.*

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Who's in the coalition that you mentioned? You talked about Heritage. Who else?

SHELBY: Yeah, there's over 100 coalition partners. And actually they reached that number at the beginning of this year. So SBA Pro-Life America has signed on, the Conservative Partnership Institute, Claremont Institute, TP USA, which is Turning Point USA, which is focused a lot on younger voters. So most of the major conservative organizations in the country really are a part of this effort.

NOEL: How unusual is it for the Heritage Foundation to have a thing like Project 2025? Is this unprecedented?

SHELBY: It's not unusual for there to be some kind of organization. They usually have this Mandate for Leadership that they will give an upcoming conservative president.

*<CLIP> Paul Dans: Heritage got on the book-, on the marker as, as an organization by delivering the first Mandate for Leadership in 1980 to President-elect Reagan.*

*<CLIP> Ronald Reagan: Heritage has transformed itself from a struggling and valiant coterie of conservatives to, well, a struggling and valiant coterie of conservatives -- [laughter] -- though today the influence and importance of Heritage is widely recognized in Washington and, indeed, by policymakers around the world.*

SHELBY: But this scope and level of organization and the years that it has taken to plan and lay out this specific Project 2025 is really unique and really has never been done before. So in that sense, just the scale of this operation is unprecedented.

NOEL: Okay. But the Mandate for Leadership has been a thing in the past. Now, when Donald Trump was elected the first time, how much of their mandate for leadership did he take?

SHELBY: He used a significant amount. So in early 2018, the Heritage Foundation came out with a press release saying that Donald Trump had, as of that moment, used over 60% of their policy proposals.

*<CLIP> Former Vice President Mike Pence: I mean, from right in the transition we went to work availing ourselves of the resources available from the Heritage Foundation. We laid out plans for this administration. We drew on the scholarship and the resources of this historic think tank.*

SHELBY: And so that just sort of gives you an idea of, A, how influential historically the Heritage Foundation is, but B, how much Donald Trump may or may not, you know, rely on this Project 2025 and the proposals that they put forth this time around.

NOEL: Can we talk about the proposals?

SHELBY: Absolutely. So, of course, if we wanted to get into the entire 800-plus book, we would be here for weeks, probably.

NOEL: <laughs>

SCORING IN <Neutral Irene - BMC>

SHELBY: There are a number of significant proposals. So one of them, they of course talk about abortion restrictions. They include in their policy book a reference to the Comstock Act, which is a long-inactive 19th century law that banned birth control and abortion pills by mail.

*<CLIP> Legal historian Mary Ziegler: Conservative groups are arguing that the Comstock Act makes it a crime to mail any abortion-related item…*

SHELBY: Broadly, a number of their policies are aimed at expanding presidential powers while shrinking the executive branch. So getting rid of the White House Gender Policy Council, domestic climate policy, getting rid of the clean energy demonstrations in the Energy Department.

*<CLIP> CNN's Jake Tapper: He also would refuse to spend money Congress has appropriated for programs he does not like, and he would remove officials he does not like from intelligence agencies.*

SHELBY: So all of these efforts at, as they said, deconstructing the administrative state. There's also a lot in there about immigration. They want much stricter immigration proposals.

*<CLIP> Charlie Kirk: When Trump is president again as the 47th president of the United States, how do we deport 30 million people?*

SHELBY: They'd like to bring back a failed effort from Trump to implement a citizenship question on the census. They want to mandate that the DOJ start legal action against local officials who choose not to prosecute in part because of immigration status. And so there's all these sort of policy agendas that span across really every aspect of what conservatives are interested in.

*<CLIP> Ali Velshi: The radical plan calls for defunding the Department of Justice, dismantling the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services. It also aims to consolidate power by placing agencies like the Federal Communications Commission under direct presidential control.*

SHELBY: And the last part of this that I would pull out as notable is, of course, their social policies. They talk a lot about getting rid of DEI. They want to stamp it out.

*<CLIP> Mike Gonzalez, The Heritage Foundation: The American people are waking up to this threat that DEI poses to our freedoms, to our way of life, to our peace of mind…*

SHELBY: They talk a lot about anti-wokeness, critical race theory, gender ideologies in schools.

*<CLIP> Former President Donald J. Trump: On day one, I will sign a new executive order to cut federal funding for any school pushing critical race theory, transgender insanity, and other inappropriate racial, sexual, or political content onto our children.*

SHELBY: And so these are sort of just some of the overarching policies that this massive book is, and I do mean massive, is focused on.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Okay. So 800 pages of policy ideas. One American president that they want to carry them out. Who's helping? Who, who are the people that would be involved in implementing Project 2025?

SHELBY: That is their second pillar. And that was sort of what they really first started working on was this LinkedIn for conservatives. But the goal is they'll have a number, 10,000-plus staffers that have been vetted by the Heritage Foundation, by Project 2025, that they can then hand to the Trump administration and say, these staffers are good to go if you want to hire any of them. In addition to this LinkedIn for conservatives, they're giving the approved staffers the option of either online training, or if they're more advanced, in-person training on everything from the basics of governments to teaching them how to make sure that they can get into office and implement the plans that conservatives want.

*<CLIP> Paul Dans: What we’re doing is systematically preparing to march into office and bring a new army of aligned, trained, and essentially weaponized conservatives ready to do battle against the deep state.*

SHELBY: When I talked to the leaders who are heading up this project, and when I spoke to Heritage Foundation on a number of occasions, they've always been quick to say this is in part because we were unprepared after Trump's 2016 win, conservatives did not expect him to win. The country really didn't expect him to win. And so Donald Trump came into office and there wasn't really any sort of platform to help him.

*<CLIP> Paul Dans: President Trump was an outsider. This is a very insular city. So it’s not going to be welcoming to outsiders. Outsiders have to come into this place prepared and know what the game is.*

SHELBY: And so they've essentially said that they've taken a playbook out of Democrats’ past plans.

*<CLIP> Paul Dans: We take a lot of exception with, with Joe Biden but the one thing I do credit his team with was being prepared. So they were signing things all week long the first week and we are going to be doing the same.*

NOEL: And so the idea is day one, we've got our people. Our people are trained. Nothing in government ever works within the first 24 hours though, right? So like these, these are big policy proposals. How are they going to get done quickly?

SHELBY: Of course. I think the plan is some of them are going to be, right, executive orders that presumably the president could sign on day one, on the first week, on the first month…

*<CLIP> Donald J. Trump: We love this guy. He says, ‘you’re not gonna be a dictator, are ya?’ I said, ‘no, no, no, other than day one.’*

SHELBY: …but others are going to be guidance and regulations that presumably could be implemented within the first 180 days of Donald Trump's presidency.

NOEL: And is there any other kind of worldview behind this, underpinning this?

SHELBY: You know, as I was reading through, one of the things that stood out to me was a sort of summary from the head of the Heritage Foundation, and he noted that the authors of this book have broad consensus over four sort of pillars. And the first is restoring, – and I'm reading this as a quote – restore the family as the centerpiece of American life and protect our children's children. The second is, as we've talked about, dismantle the administrative state and return self-governance to the American people. The third, defend our nation's sovereignty, borders and bounty against global threats. And the fourth is to secure our God-given individual rights to live freely, what our Constitution calls the blessings of liberty. And so I think, if you read those four, you get a sense of the sort of religious undertones that are also making up a lot of these policies and a lot of this book.

*<CLIP> Paul Dans: I think of conservatives as focused on God, country, and family, not government. But progressives spend 24 hours a day redesigning government. Now we see that government is directed against God, directed against family, directed against this country. So it is our charge now to get back and take over the government.*

NOEL: You know, you said it's a multi-million dollar effort. Whose money is it?

SHELBY: Well, two of the big people that are involved indirectly are Leonard Leo, who, of course, has been described as a puppet master pushing this conservative agenda for years. He notoriously gave Donald Trump a list of judges during his first administration. And then the Koch brothers. And they're not directly donating to Project 2025, but they have donated to those coalition partners that we talked about, millions and millions of dollars. And so, of course, that tangibly ends up helping Project 2025.

NOEL: Okay. Now, it's worth noting that the Trump campaign could decide it doesn't want to do any of this. Right. So there's, there's nothing saying Donald Trump, if he were to be elected president, has got to carry out this plan. When you talk to people inside of the campaign, do they want to carry out this plan?

SHELBY: I think it depends on who you talk to, honestly.

NOEL: Huh.

SHELBY: And what's notable is there was a slew of reports that came out earlier this year and, and towards the end of last year about, you know, Donald Trump's plans if he went into office again and they used a lot of people from these groups and from Project 2025, and the campaign very quickly came out and issued a pretty strict statement saying, we're appreciative of everything that Project 2025 and these other groups are doing, but they don't speak for the campaign. Donald Trump and the campaign speak for us. And these initiatives, if they come from Project 2025, are not coming from Donald Trump. And so I think that's notable. But I also do think it's important to remember that there are a lot of former Trump officials involved in Heritage Foundation in general and in Project 2025. And last time around, Donald Trump used so much of their policy proposals. And a lot of these policy proposals that they're putting forth are pretty common policies and pretty popular within the conservative movement. So I would expect at the end of the day that Donald Trump uses this project in some form or another.

SCORING IN <The Sky Darkens>

NOEL: Semafor’s Shelby Talcott. Coming up: Shelby’s back to talk about how the Biden campaign was busy ignoring Project 2025 until TikTok started talking about it. Stay tuned.

[BREAK]

SEAN: We are back with an encore presentation of our Project 2025 episode from a few months ago. Because this week, Joe Biden and his people sent out a tweet. Not the one most people were expecting saying he’s, you know, stepping aside. Instead he wrote three words: Google Project 2025. Full stop.

And everyone knows *Today, Explained* is gonna do you better than a Google search. Especially lately. Do better, Google. I digress.   
  
Here’s Noel and Shelby Talcott of *Semafor*. They’re gonna start with how the Biden campaign initially responded to Project 2025 earlier this year when they started noticing people talking about it on TikTok.

Homer disappearing into the bushes dot GIF …

NOEL: Alright, so Shelby, how and when did the Biden campaign start responding to news of Project 2025?

SHELBY: They really took notice of it just a few months ago..,

SCORING IN <The Neck (Harpsichord Stomp)>

SHELBY: They started seeing videos coming out about the project and denouncing the project.

*<CLIP> TikTok user @thedevilsdaughter162: What’s Project 2025? It’s a nightmare. That’s all I can say. It is an absolute nightmare.*

*<CLIP> TikTok user @caseyincontext: Anytime someone posts a video about Biden potentially losing in 2024, the top comment is always about Project 2025.*

*<CLIP> TikTok user @heathergtv: Welcome to part two of our series Project 2025: How Democracy Dies!*

SHELBY: And so they saw that and thought, well, this is perfect. And that's when they started putting out their own videos, going after the project, highlighting the project.

*<CLIP> TikTok user @bidenhq: It’s all a part of their Project 2025 agenda, which is a set of extreme policy plans that they have for a second Trump term: things like banning the distribution of abortion medication, declaring that marriage doesn’t apply to same-sex couples, and undoing the historic progress that President Biden has done fighting climate change and forgiving student debt.*

SHELBY: And it's interesting. There's TikToks sort of doing explainers. They have a TikTok where AOC is speaking about Project 2025.

*<CLIP> AOC: This is exactly what Republicans have been going for. You have the Heritage Foundation, you have lots of folks, who are on record…*

SHELBY: Of course, that's notable because AOC is one of the younger lawmakers who often appeals to younger voters. And she has also been critical of Joe Biden in the past.

*<CLIP> AOC: Not only do they want to go after abortion, not only do they want to go after reproductive freedom, they’re going after IVF, they’re going after contraception…*

SHELBY: And so having her come out and talk about it and putting that video up on TikTok is notable. And I'm told that those TikToks are some of their best performing videos as well. So it is resonating with that sect of voters that, quite frankly, they've been struggling with in the polls.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Okay. So the Heritage Foundation, this is not unprecedented, they ordinarily do have some sort of guidelines, things the Heritage Foundation would like you to do if you're elected president. Are you surprised this election cycle that this is getting so much attention?

SHELBY: I think I am a little bit surprised just because, again, it's such a dense DC type thing, right? 800 plus pages. But for whatever reason, I think in part because of the drastic changes that this project is hoping to implement, it has really resonated with a group of voters that in a way I, I'm not sure it would have in years past.

NOEL:: Lemme ask you about something I think when I skim these 800 plus pages. Donald Trump, during his first term, used to talk a lot about the deep state.

*<CLIP> President Trump: Unelected deep state operatives who defy the voters to push their own secret agendas are truly a threat to democracy itself.*

NOEL: And people say, well, the deep state is just experts who are already in DC and they know what they're doing. I gather that the Heritage Foundation probably doesn't call it the Deep State, but does this 800 page book seem to speak at all to Donald Trump's idea that government itself is the problem?

SHELBY: Absolutely. And I think that goes back to that comment from Paul Dans when I interviewed him a year and a half ago or so, where he said, what fundamentally unites our coalition is deconstructing the administrative state. And I think that goes back to Donald Trump, sort of one of his ultimate goals that he never really could fully do during his first term.

NOEL: So let's say Donald Trump is elected and he decides that he wants to take Project 2025 on full bore, right? He's going to go in on it. How much of this could a Trump White House actually execute, given that we have a Congress that could be split, that could be fully democratic, given that we have a Supreme Court. What do you think? How seriously should we take this?

SHELBY: I think this should be taken really seriously, just in part because it is such a big effort that has been going on for so many years. And because we've seen Donald Trump use Heritage Foundation in the past, and because there's so many former Trump officials involved in this who still remain close to the former president. Now, the question of how much could actually be implemented, I think, really depends on what they're trying to implement. I do think that they anticipate that some of this will receive pushback, and they are also preparing for that. They're preparing for, you know, sort of potential legal issues and potential legal pushback. They're prepping for a long fight to get what they want done in government.

NOEL: And let me ask you lastly, so Democrats, at least some of them are freaking out about this, on TikTok and elsewhere, in opinion pages, etc. But of course, for Republican voters, this could be very appealing. ‘Hey, we've got a plan. And when we get into office, if you vote us into office, we're going to execute that plan.’

SHELBY: Absolutely. And that's really the ultimate pitch when this whole thing started.

SCORING IN <Meiji de Tokasu - BMC>

SHELBY: ‘We're ready, we have the money, get on board, help us figure all of these policy plans out so that we are never unprepared again, as we were in 2016.’ And so that's been the pitch to Republicans. And these are conservative policies that a lot of conservatives agree on. And of course, on the flip side, Democrats are going to be wildly upset about this. You know, these are policies that they don't agree on. And so we can expect that should Donald Trump take office again and tap Project 2025, that Democrats are going to fight with whatever means that they can to try to make it more difficult for these sorts of policies to be implemented.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Shelby Talcott. You can read her election coverage at semafor dot com.

Today’s episode was produced by Avishay Artsy and edited by Matt Collette. Laura Bullard is our fact-checker and David Herman is our engineer. I’m Noel King. It’s *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]