Rusty Bowers was talking on his cellphone to Karen Fann after church services on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, looking ahead to another hectic week.

It was Nov. 22, 2020. The counting was done and Joe Biden led Donald Trump by a razor-thin margin, but the presidential election results in Arizona still had not been certified.

The state’s House speaker and Senate president have a bond that stretches back decades, forged by family friendships. This time, the two Republicans conferred about something that surprised them both.

Fann told Bowers that the president’s allies had called her repeatedly. They wanted to get her involved in a plan to help deliver an election result more to his liking.
By then, it was clear to most that Trump had lost his reelection bid for the White House and that Arizona had helped elect Biden.

Seconds after Bowers hung up with Fann, and while he still sat parked in his driveway in the driver's seat of his Toyota Prius, the dashboard on his car lit up.

Bowers had a phone call. It was the White House.

In a Bluetooth conversation that lasted several minutes, Trump and his lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, noted their deep concern for what they viewed as widespread fraud and irregularities in Arizona’s election. Giuliani said they had evidence dead veterans had voted. And illegal immigrants. And there were other problems, too.

Trump and Giuliani wanted Bowers to help ensure President-elect Biden’s 10,457-vote win in Arizona would not be formalized a week later. They told him “there’s a way we could help the president” and Arizona had a “unique law” that allowed the Legislature to choose its electors, rather than voters, he recalled.

“That’s the first I’ve heard of that one,” a skeptical Bowers told them. He told the men he needed proof to back up their claims: “I don’t make these kinds of decisions just willy-nilly. You’ve got to talk to my lawyers. And I’ve got some good lawyers.”

Bowers told them he supported Trump, voted for Trump and campaigned for him, too. What he would not do is break the law for him.

“You are giving me nothing but conjecture and asking me to break my oath and commit to doing something I cannot do because I swore I wouldn't. I will follow the Constitution,” he told the men.

Trump, who was gregarious throughout much of the call but quiet during that exchange, told Bowers he understood.

“Rudy, you’ve gotta get him the evidence that he needs,” Bowers recalled the president saying.

Trump told Bowers, “We’re just trying to investigate.”
Giuliani repeatedly assured Bowers he would send the evidence to attorneys at the state House of Representatives.

The evidence never arrived, Bowers told The Arizona Republic.

But Fann proceeded with the ballot review Trump wanted.

Why did this scene unfold in Arizona?

This is how Arizona plunged into a fog of conspiracies, riven with partisanship and targeted by opportunists from across the country.

Trump led the effort to undermine the results after some projected Arizona to slip to Democrat Joe Biden.

The state was one of two targeted by congressional Republicans on Jan. 6 who were willing to disenfranchise millions of voters in a brash legal experiment that would have redefined the election-certification process.

And even before Trump left the White House, Fann put in motion a ballot review.

Of the swing states, Arizona perhaps was the most susceptible to an election challenge.
Biden’s margin of victory in Arizona was the smallest of any state he won. State government was in Republican hands, providing plenty of potential allies, from the governor to the leaders of the state Legislature to the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors.

Trump, who viewed the focus on Russian interference in the 2016 election as an effort to delegitimize his victory, now heaped doubt on Biden’s win. But Trump’s loyal base didn’t see how tenuous his hold on Arizona had grown. While Trump evinced confidence at rallies, behind the scenes his campaign team knew the state was up for grabs.

Trump’s push to challenge the election results in Arizona provided balm for a man unwilling to accept defeat. It also sowed lingering doubt that would fuel an attack from people all over the country on the state’s election systems.

Many Republicans quickly joined Trump’s unfounded accusations of fraud, some more forcefully than others. A few, such as Bowers and Gov. Doug Ducey, resisted the public and political pressure to get behind the narrative of a stolen election.

One Arizona member of Congress participated in protests outside Maricopa County’s election facilities even as ballots were being counted; three GOP members of Congress from Arizona later voted to set aside the state’s election results.

The circuslike atmosphere drew Trump die-hards, election conspiracy theorists and far-right media that simultaneously created buzz and fed off it.

It raised cash for Republicans and doubts for voters, threatening public confidence in elections here and elsewhere.

Interviews with dozens of people connected with the drama at the Arizona Legislature and the Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Phoenix, where the ballots were examined for months, make this much clear: The spectacle that unfolded here was a partisan obsession pushed by Trump’s close allies and made possible by just a handful of people in Arizona.

It didn’t have to happen this way.

Before Fann ordered the ballot review, for several days in December, Bowers, Fann and the Republican chair of the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors, Clint Hickman, tried to reach a deal for a joint audit conducted by an accredited firm.

Over four months, The Republic examined a trove of text messages, emails and court records, many made public after suing the state for access. Reporters spoke to decision-makers, consultants, staff, contractors, campaign aides and others tied to the review of the presidential and U.S. Senate races. Some talked on the record about their experiences, while others spoke on the condition they not be identified in order to speak candidly about private conversations.

The Republic uncovered efforts to circumvent the popular vote to engineer an illegitimate Trump victory. Once the results were certified, Trump and his allies shifted to a campaign to pressure local Republicans to overturn election results from voters who were using an early ballot system largely shaped over decades by their own party.
Trump, Giuliani, Fann and others who helped bring about the ballot review did not respond to repeated requests to discuss their recollections of the events leading to the review.

Bowers shared his story for the first time over three interviews totaling nearly six hours. The interviews took place by phone, in his office suite, and on the patio of a Cracker Barrel in the East Valley, where he verified key dates from his red leather-bound journal.

Like most of Arizona, the speaker watched the scenes unfold from the periphery as Fann steered the Senate into a probe led by the Florida-based Cyber Ninjas, a company with no prior experience in election reviews that is run by a man who publicly stated the election was tainted by fraud.

Fann has not yet explained her U-turn from favoring an accredited audit to authorizing a review led by partisans. Those who know her and did speak said she sought to quell Republican anger over Trump's loss and could not resist the pressure campaign from his allies.

Early on, Bowers remembered offering her a stark assessment: Some of Trump’s most ardent supporters in the GOP-controlled Legislature viewed Trump’s election grievances as political opportunity.

“Karen, this is about trophies,” he said he told her. “This is about trophies on the wall — that individual members want to be able to say, ‘I forced them to do this.’”

**The coliseum rally: Trump’s moment of triumph**

Before the Veterans Memorial Coliseum became the proving ground for conservative conspiracies, it was the location of a rally at perhaps the high-water mark of Trump’s presidency.

The economy was in the final days of the longest expansion in U.S. history. Coronavirus seemed like a foreign problem in a faraway land. Bernie Sanders, the independent senator from Vermont who described himself as a democratic socialist, had won the New Hampshire primary the week before. Biden finished fifth.

Trump’s approval rating was inching upward after his acquittal in his first impeachment trial.

So it was on Feb. 19, 2020, when Trump strode onstage to a near-capacity crowd at the coliseum. Like most of his campaign events, it seemed to mix the noise of a rock concert, the passion of a religious revival and the sideshow elements of a carnival.

Two supporters carried Ervin Julian, a 100-year-old World War II veteran, down the coliseum’s steep stairs to a front-row seat on stage behind Trump and in front of the boisterous crowd.
One of the men carrying Julian wore a shirt that said “We are Q” on the front and “17 WWG1WGA” on the back. It is a phrase adopted by the QAnon conspiracy movement that stands for “Where We Go 1 We Go All.”

One by one, Ducey, all four of the state’s Republicans in Congress, Fann, Bowers and Kelli Ward, the state Republican Party chairwoman, took the stage as Trump praised the state’s GOP team.

“With your help, we are going to defeat the radical socialist Democrats,” Trump said early on. “We have the best economy, the most-prosperous country that we’ve ever had and the most powerful military anywhere in the world.”

Trump’s 82-minute, triumphal speech left his supporters delighted and his campaign confident that he was well positioned to again win a state he had narrowly carried in 2016, when he defeated Democrat Hillary Clinton by 91,234 votes.

Trump’s victory that year extended Arizona’s run of wins for Republicans in presidential races. The GOP won 16 of 17 presidential contests in the state beginning in 1952.

Trump’s electrifying optimism, shared by thousands of his supporters inside the coliseum, seemed rooted in political inevitability. In hindsight, Trump’s prospects began dimming almost immediately after that rally.

Less than a month after Trump’s speech, Biden took control of his party’s nomination, pitting Trump against the candidate best positioned to win Arizona and the one Trump
worried about most. The coronavirus soon exploded into a pandemic that locked Americans inside their homes, upended the political agenda and brought a sudden end to a decade-long run of economic growth.

Democrats raise first concerns over election management

The state’s presidential preference election on March 17 and the rapidly worsening health crisis raised the first real concerns about voting and election management in Arizona, and they largely came from Democrats.

By then, COVID-19 was beginning to spark fear across the country, and the White House had called for a 15-day national quarantine to halt the virus. Democrats moved their final presidential debate to Washington, D.C., from Phoenix because of the widening crisis.

The day before the election, Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., texted Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs, a Democrat, asking her to delay the election, according to records
obtained by The Republic. The two have known each other for years and served together in the state Legislature.

Sinema sent Hobbs a link to a Twitter post by a political website that said polling sites could be hazardous during a pandemic. At the time, little was known about the virus and its spread. Some feared shared items, such as pens, could help spread the coronavirus.

“File a request to the Az Supreme Court ASAP asking you (to) postpone,” Sinema texted. “This is what Ohio just ... Did. You can file a special action right now.”

“Who is this,” Hobbs responded in a text.

“Kyrsten. I would file a special action NOW. We do not want to be the state that violated the 15 day effort to stop the virus. The governor has been very slow to move on every precaution. That is his choice, I guess. But you do not have to be like that. You can do what needs to be done. I am going to say the election should be postponed publicly very soon.”

Hobbs responded, “Understood.”

Maricopa County Recorder Adrian Fontes, a Democrat, wanted to mail ballots to every voter in the primary because of the coronavirus.

Neither change happened, but for Republicans, who didn’t have a primary election, both ideas raised concerns about voting.

The GOP-dominated Maricopa County Board of Supervisors had taken greater responsibility for management from Fontes in 2019, especially on Election Day operations and emergency issues. But the state’s far-right figures didn’t view board members as reliable allies if there was to be a battle over results.

**Trump’s concerns: Martha McSally and more**

Meanwhile, Trump had his own worries in Arizona.
In May 2020, the president held a meeting in the Roosevelt Room in the White House to discuss the state of play in Arizona.

Trump was worried that Sen. Martha McSally, R-Ariz., was losing to challenger Mark Kelly and could “drag” him down as well, those familiar with the discussion said. The president wondered whether the GOP should run someone other than the incumbent against Kelly, the well-known retired astronaut. Then-Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., who had joined the discussion, made it clear he stood by McSally.

The GOP ticket had other worries, too.

On July 1, Vice President Mike Pence flew to Phoenix to assure the public that Arizona would have enough ventilators to manage the rising COVID-19 caseload.

Privately, Pence had other matters on his mind.

Away from the news cameras, inside a conference room in the Lincoln J. Ragsdale Executive Terminal at the Phoenix airport, Pence asked how the campaign was preparing for November.

“What is your plan for absentee early voting? Are you guys ready for any of the changes that would come of COVID?” Pence asked, according to someone familiar with the conversation.
People on hand told the vice president that 80% of Arizona’s electorate routinely vote by mail. It startled Pence, who was following up on concerns Trump had raised because other states, such as Georgia, Michigan and Pennsylvania, were expanding mail-based voting because of the pandemic.

Election officials in key 2020 swing states made significant changes to their election systems. For example, Nevada sent every registered voter a mail-in ballot for its summer primary. Several Pennsylvania counties, including those in the Democratic-heavy Philadelphia area, extended the postmark deadline for that state’s August primary.

By comparison, Arizona had a long-standing mail-in system popular with all voters.

Pence learned Arizona has signature verification and other security provisions in place.

Arizona Republicans assured Pence they were “comfortable” with the state’s early voting system and would “keep our eye on Adrian Fontes.”

Ducey expounded on voting in Arizona during an Aug. 5 public appearance at the White House, with Trump at his side, to discuss their management of the pandemic. Trump groused about mailing ballots to voters in Nevada. Ducey defended the widespread practice in his state.

“It will be easy to vote. Seventy-eight percent of the citizens already vote by mail in Arizona, but we’ve been doing this since 1992,” Ducey said. “So over the course of decades, we’ve established a system that works and can be trusted.”
When the cameras were gone, Trump seemed pleased with the governor’s answer. The president exuberantly asked Ducey if his state needed any additional help.

But the August primary created more anxiety for Republicans. Democratic turnout matched the GOP’s, and after Trump’s attacks on mail-in voting, many Republicans held onto their ballots until the last moment before dropping them off at the polls.

One GOP figure said the daily mailed-in returns of Republican early votes had “fallen off a cliff.” Trump’s team on the ground in Arizona was alarmed.

During voting periods, both parties focus get-out-the-vote efforts on people who have not yet cast their ballots. The longer reliable voters held their ballots, the more the parties would have to use their scarce time and money to try to convince them to participate.

The McCain effect: Long feud wasn’t forgotten

Trump always had another, unique problem in Arizona that would cost him: his feud with the late Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz.

McCain forged a bond with Arizona voters over his almost 36 years in office. He won all 11 House, Senate and presidential races he ran in the state. In 2016, McCain received more votes in Arizona than Trump did.

Trump’s broadsides against McCain, extending even after his death, didn’t matter to most Republican voters. But they did matter to some, and in a close race, it had an outsized impact.

Beginning in the early days of his presidential run in 2015 and continuing into the final months of the 2020 election, Trump attacked McCain in personal terms.

The attacks cost Trump support among women, moderate Republicans and independent voters who respected McCain and found the attacks unpresidential.

For more than a year ahead of the election, political pollsters and experts warned that Trump was in danger of losing Arizona, in part as support eroded among these key constituencies, especially in parts of Phoenix and its suburbs where the late senator had dominated his races.

Despite the warnings, Trump kept up the attacks.

At one point, Trump personally asked Ducey to help keep the senator’s widow, Cindy McCain, neutral in the race, people familiar with the request said.

A person close to Cindy McCain said the governor never asked her to withhold an endorsement in the race. A spokesman for the governor would not characterize Ducey’s conversations with McCain, saying they were private.

Though Trump’s campaign hoped “to keep her on the sidelines,” they sensed she was “moving in the wrong direction,” someone familiar with the strategy recalled. “And that’s going to be a problem for us.”
In September, The Atlantic magazine published a story citing unnamed sources that said Trump complained when flags were lowered in observance of McCain’s death in 2018. “What the (expletive) are we doing that for? Guy was a (expletive) loser,” Trump said, according to The Atlantic.

The president denied The Atlantic’s story, although other media outlets substantiated some of the remarks attributed to Trump.

Three weeks later, Cindy McCain publicly endorsed Biden.

Trump responded with a tweet saying, “Never a fan of John. Cindy can have Sleepy Joe!” Democrats followed her announcement with an ad blitz that put her words on screens across the country, especially in Arizona.

The Arizona Republican Party later censured Cindy McCain.

In a series of Saturday video conferences from their homes in the final weeks before the election, Ducey and his team advised top staffers in Trump’s campaign to maximize their visits to the battleground state with appearances outside of Phoenix.

Trump and Pence visited eight cities other than Phoenix in the final month in an effort to build a rural firewall.
Ducey’s team suggested Trump call into country radio shows and talk about how his policies affect their jobs, their pocketbooks and their families.

One person familiar with the calls said Trump’s political team knew “Arizona was going to be tough.”

**Arizona falls away, into the Democratic column**

While Trump, Pence and their surrogates zipped in and out of Arizona to try to shore up support, Biden and his running mate, Kamala Harris, barely visited.

The GOP campaign rallies left Republicans fired up about their prospects — and poorly prepared for an election loss.

Hours after the polls closed on Election Day, Fox News made an aggressive, but ultimately correct, call that Biden had won Arizona. Four hours later, The Associated Press followed suit.

Arizona was the first state projected to fall from Trump’s winning 2016 coalition, and it raised the specter of further losses in states such as Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania. All of those states, plus Georgia, eventually did flip to Biden, but it wasn’t immediately clear that would happen.

Trump responded to the quick Arizona call in an overnight news conference from the East Room of the White House that effectively gave license to his supporters to cast the election as stolen.

“This is a fraud on the American public,” Trump said at 2:30 a.m. Nov. 4 to a cheering crowd. “Frankly, we did win this election. ... So our goal now is to ensure the integrity for the good of this nation.”

The president said he wanted “all voting to stop” and said his campaign would be headed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Instead, the Trump campaign leaned heavily on officials at Fox News, hoping to undo their Arizona projection. In the days after the quick call, Ducey’s 2018 deputy campaign manager walked conservative host Sean Hannity and two senior executives with Fox News through scenarios that indicated why the state remained within Trump’s reach. The Ducey aide gave a similar briefing to the Trump campaign.

While Trump could not fathom how periodic updates could shift the race so dramatically in Arizona, campaign insiders were long accustomed to close races and results that changed over days as ballots were counted.

Arizona counts its mailed-in ballots first, and fewer Republicans sent in early ballots in 2020, instead dropping them off at the polls. Those votes were tabulated last, after Election Day voters’ tallies.
In 2018, Sinema won her Senate seat after six days of counting. In 2016, U.S. Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Ariz., won his first primary election by 16 votes after a recount shifted only a few dozen votes over 17 days.

Biggs now was one of the leading skeptics of Arizona's results.

An angry crowd outside; deadly concerns

After the quick call for Biden in Arizona on Nov. 3, raucous protesters gathered outside the building where Maricopa County officials counted ballots.

By then, some Trump supporters suggested — falsely — that election officials provided them Sharpie pens that could bleed through their ballots and eliminate their votes. It was a conspiracy theory amplified in conservative circles, including by Eric Trump, the president’s son.

For people like Fontes and Maricopa County Sheriff Paul Penzone, also a Democrat, it was not a moment to explain the intricacies of ballot markings; they feared violence.

Dozens of people — some clearly carrying firearms — swarmed the parking lot area outside the county’s election offices.
Mindful of the deadly clash in 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, Penzone put several armed response teams inside the building and had dozens of other deputies in the area on standby “to protect the systems, the ballots, the people — everything in there.”

Fontes, the county recorder, called it a necessary response to a charged situation. At one point, the angry crowd pulled an election worker into their unprotected area.

“This person literally had to get physically wrestled away from a group of them and pulled back into the building,” Fontes remembered. “It was in my head that there would be casualties. It was in my head that we would have to be cleaning blood out of the warehouse because they were ready, they were armed. ... They came to assault my staff.”

Protests went on for days, with U.S. Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz., fueling accusations of a stolen election. Alex Jones, a conspiracy monger who called the 2012 massacre of children at an elementary school in Connecticut a “giant hoax,” used a megaphone to exhort protesters to maintain their fight for Trump.

The Sheriff’s Office has spent an estimated $1.2 million on law enforcement efforts tied to the election and ballot review, including on demonstrations and protection efforts. The tab may not yet be final.

While Trump signaled the beginning of a drawn-out fight in the hours after the election, McSally, the Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate, all but disappeared from public view.

McSally didn’t formally concede her race for days, but by Nov. 9, several of her key campaign staff were vacationing in Mexico. She wound up losing to Kelly by 78,806 votes.

When the presidential ballots were fully counted on Nov. 14, just 10,457 votes — fewer than the number of people who fit in the coliseum — separated Biden from Trump. The 0.3 percentage point difference made it the tightest presidential race in state history.

It was a bitter disappointment, but it wasn’t a complete loss for Republicans. The GOP maintained its hold on the Statehouse, and Arizona’s four Republicans in Congress were reelected. Republicans accepted those results, made in the same election that delivered Trump’s loss.

But Republicans loyal to Trump could not accept his defeat.

Avalanche of anger follows formal loss

Trump supporters across the country bombarded Arizona election officials and lawmakers with staggering numbers of emails, voicemails and text messages.

Like Trump, many voters could not reconcile the energy of his campaign with the quick call for Biden and the ever-tightening margins in Arizona. Democratic gains in traditionally red Maricopa County fueled suspicions that Trump’s loss owed more to cheating rather than his limited appeal.
State Rep. Shawnna Bolick, R-Phoenix, said she received 57,000 emails in the first two months after the election — and still gets some.

At one point early on, Bowers’ secretary told him the office received more than 20,000 emails and 10,000 voicemails each day. After receiving 9,000 text messages at one point, now-Sen. Paul Boyer, R-Glendale, got another phone number.

The messages often maintained fraud tainted the election, and Democrats and their allies were covering it up. Many were vulgar; some were threatening.

“It is criminal for state legislators to certify a fraudulent election,” one message to Bowers said.

“Rusty is going to prison,” another email said. “80,000,000 patriots will make sure of this.”

“Fix this mess of an election now, do NOT let the people who committed obvious fraud, intimidation, threaten & lie & who did Not win into our Whitehouse,” read another.

The din included more than just Trump supporters, lawmakers said.

“In all of my time in office, I’ve never seen the magnitude or type of people telling me their concerns about the election,” said state Sen. J.D. Mesnard, R-Chandler.
“Many of them have been from far-off places,” said House Majority Leader Ben Toma, R-Peoria. “It’s safe to say there’s been a ton of pressure to do something.”

One thing that set Arizona apart from other close states was the trajectory of the race. In Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, Biden staged come-from-behind victories. Trump drew closer in Arizona’s initial count before falling short.

Trump’s comeback may have given supporters a sense that another push would have changed the outcome, at least in one state.

**Bowers, Fann draw White House interest**

Trump and Giuliani zeroed in on people in Arizona who could still make a push.

It wouldn’t be Ducey, who had shown little interest in raising doubts about the election. And it wouldn’t be Hobbs, the Democratic secretary of state, who defended it on national television.

The president and his lawyer targeted Bowers and Fann, the Republican heads of the Legislature.

The weekend before Thanksgiving, a top White House aide called around, looking for cellphone numbers for both.

Those close to Fann said she felt squeezed by the most conservative members in her caucus. She was preparing for the holidays and didn’t want to discuss the election. She seemed to want to put off talking to the president and his surrogates.

When the White House came calling, Fann needed a strategy.

“What are we going to do? … They’re putting pressure on me — the national folks want to have fact-finding committees to find out about the fraud in Arizona,” Bowers remembered Fann saying. “She said, ‘They’re trying to get in touch with me and we’ve got to make sure we’re on the same page.’”

They never had a chance. Right after he hung up the phone with Fann, Bowers received the call from Trump and Giuliani while sitting in his Prius.

By itself, the call was memorable for Bowers. It became amusingly so when he needed to search the small screen on his cellphone to find his lawyer’s contact information for the president.

A natural raconteur, Bowers joked to Trump and Giuliani he might have a story for his grandkids one day: that he accidentally hung up on the president.


Then Bowers really did accidentally hang up.

The White House called him back, and Bowers and Giuliani shared a laugh.

Bowers needed some levity.
While Arizona’s election stirred national passions, Bowers, 69, was privately tending to his dying daughter. Her liver was failing, and she was rejected for an organ transplant. Inside his house, and later in a hospital, Bowers saw his daughter’s life slipping away.

Bowers documented the eventful period, as he routinely does, in his handwritten journal through pages and pages of tight cursive writing. It is a distinctive practice for a man with many interests.

Bowers’ weathered face betrays his love of the outdoors, but perhaps his greatest passion is art. He paints and has sold sculptures. At least once, Bowers passed time in the often-mundane setting of the Legislature by building a miniature pinewood derby car for his grandson on his desk during breaks.

Bowers’ call with Trump and Giuliani revealed two of his more obvious traits: Bowers can be pleasant, but he’s no pushover.

“Rusty is a cowboy,” said one Capitol insider, in a reference to his independent nature.

Fann, 67, grew up in Prescott, one of Arizona’s most conservative areas. Decades ago, she started a transportation business that puts up guardrails to keep motorists safe.

She was elected to municipal government around the Prescott area where politicking didn’t overshadow problem-solving.

She brought political pragmatism to a legislative seat at the Statehouse, where she has served for a decade, the past two terms as president of the Senate.

Fann, too, has a life outside politics. She likes to golf and cook. She is known to bring homemade pies to friends and is part of a dinner club.

Her agreeable nature often leaves her in the middle of the warring factions of her Republican caucus.

Her confidants at the Statehouse include lobbyists from both political camps who have worked with her for years. Her philosophy on the job is “‘We’re in this thing together, we’ve got to pick up the trash, we’ve got to do it, let’s work together, let’s figure things out,’” one Democratic lobbyist friend said.

If the ballot review sometimes felt like a political crucible, it also gave Fann a national political identity.

But at the Statehouse, she had one goal: retain her role as Senate president. Unlike Bowers, who won his leadership post despite the misgivings of his party’s far-right members, Fann owed her position to the more conservative members of her chamber.

Her friend, former state Sen. Steve Pierce, R-Prescott, a relative moderate, lost his title as Senate president after the 2012 elections to then-Sen. Andy Biggs and spent four lonely years out of power. Her friends say it was a loss Fann didn’t want to repeat.

*Includes information from Arizona Republic reporter Mary Jo Pitzl.*
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As Gov. Doug Ducey certified Arizona's election results, he received a phone call identifiable by the distinctive ring tone assigned to it: “Hail to the Chief.” Ducey silenced it. But efforts to alter the results continued.

Yvonne Wingett Sanchez and Ronald J. Hansen, Arizona Republic
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Rudy Giuliani and his advisers walked into a nondescript meeting room in the state Senate Dec. 1 to discuss a gambit that could alter the results of the 2020 election. In that meeting were the two people President Donald Trump's team viewed as central to flipping Arizona.

The goal was simple: Arizona House Speaker Rusty Bowers and Senate President Karen Fann could help replace the state’s 11 presidential electors, whose votes were supposed to go to Democrat Joe Biden, with electors for Trump.

Biden won Arizona by the narrowest margin in the country, just 10,457 votes, and the state’s GOP-controlled state government presented what appeared to be an inviting opportunity.

Trump and his allies, including Giuliani, had for weeks pointed to purported irregularities in Arizona, claiming they contributed to a stolen election. A day earlier, Giuliani headlined a meeting at a Phoenix hotel where he and other Arizona Republicans presented claims of widespread voter fraud.
Now, in a roomful of Republicans gathered for a meeting he requested, the president’s lawyer expected a “friendly crowd.”

It wasn’t.

“I can’t believe how hostile this meeting is,” Giuliani said, according to the recollections of attendees.

Days earlier, Bowers had insisted on evidence from Trump and Giuliani in a private phone call. At the meeting, he said, Giuliani “was getting pummeled on all sides with pointed questions — incisive, pointed questions.”

Bowers left the two-hour meeting underwhelmed by the fraud claims and unwilling to seek to replace Arizona’s electors or to hold a hearing on the election.

Eventually, he considered a proposal to an audit of Maricopa County’s election systems, but only with accredited experts and the county’s cooperation.

Fann also left feeling a need to do something, and she seemed willing to move ahead with the joint audit approach.

But during the next two weeks, the Republican leaders’ dual-chamber approach gave way to Fann’s Senate-only ballot review. It drew in Trump loyalists from all over the country and shattered the Senate’s relations with leaders of the state’s most-populous county.

Fann’s decision surprised Bowers.

In a four-month investigation, The Arizona Republic interviewed dozens of people who were in and around the effort to alter the election outcome and the ballot review that for months sustained outrage over Trump’s loss. Some talked on the record about their experiences, while others spoke on the condition they not be identified in order to speak candidly about private conversations.

The Republic also reviewed thousands of pages of documents obtained through public records requests and through an ongoing lawsuit against the Senate and the company it hired to conduct the ballot review.

Trump and his allies, such as Giuliani and Fann, did not respond to repeated requests for interviews.

Trump loyalists quickly focused on Maricopa County, where Trump lost by 45,109 votes, after winning the county by about the same margin in 2016.

Republican U.S. Reps. Andy Biggs, Paul Gosar and David Schweikert sent a letter to the county Board of Supervisors on Nov. 13, weeks before the results were certified, asking them to manually audit every ballot cast, “allowing tabulators to review ballot images and compare the results to current totals.”

The slim margin between Trump and Biden, “together with questions regarding anomalies and potential errors, is more than enough reasoning” for a full audit, the letter said. An audit would inspire public confidence in the result, it said.
U.S. Rep. Debbie Lesko, R-Ariz., seemed to have doubts. The former PTA mom and state senator, who represents the West Valley, called Clint Hickman, who chaired the county supervisors and also hails from that area.

“What is going on?” she asked. Hickman explained the situation as he saw it.

“It doesn’t feel right. I’m not signing that letter,” the county supervisor remembered Lesko telling him. Lesko did not respond to requests to discuss the matter.

In court, the Trump campaign and his GOP allies filed at least eight failed lawsuits in efforts to change the results. The suits ranged from unfounded claims that “Sharpiegate” allowed voters to cast ballots using markers they knew would not be counted to the Arizona Republican Party claiming Maricopa County had too few poll-watchers to handle the signature-verification process.

None of the lawsuits reversed the process.

On Nov. 30, Republican Gov. Doug Ducey sat alongside Secretary of State Katie Hobbs, a Democrat, to sign the official canvass certifying Arizonans voted for Biden. Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich, a Republican, watched.

As Ducey signed, the governor received a phone call identifiable by the distinctive ring tone assigned to it: “Hail to the Chief.”

Ducey silenced it.

The Giuliani visit: ‘Like meeting a movie star’

On the same day, at about the same time, Giuliani and his team appeared about 2 miles away at the Hyatt Regency Phoenix to make claims of widespread election problems: Voting machines could be hacked. Signatures on mail-in ballots were not verified. Arizona, a state of 7 million people, has 5 million illegal immigrants, and surely some of them must have voted.

In fact, tests before and after the election indicated the voting machines counted ballots accurately, suggesting the machines were not hacked.

County election officials did verify the signatures linked to ballots sent by mail. And none of the fewer than 300,000 undocumented immigrants who live in Arizona was known to have voted.

The meeting drew an array of Trump supporters.

Outside The Arizona Republic, a short walk from the hotel, Ali Alexander, organizer of the “Stop the Steal” rallies, used a megaphone as he blasted Ducey for certifying the election results.

A crowd of sign-carrying Trump supporters booed the governor. Jake Angeli, who would become famous as the “QAnon shaman” after the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol, howled in disapproval of Ducey and pumped his arms in the air.
The hotel meeting was a rare opportunity to command national attention for state lawmakers more accustomed to district-level work that confines them to meetings with chambers of commerce, ribbon-cuttings and happy hours with lobbyists.

Until Trump, few had such close contact with the president of the United States and prominent members of his team. Biggs and Gosar sat behind Giuliani’s table. At least nine state lawmakers attended.

State Rep. Mark Finchem, R-Oro Valley, hosted the meeting, which Trump joined by phone. It seemed to bestow newfound importance on a man once ridiculed for wearing a “cowboy costume” at the Legislature.

Finchem, who has described himself as a member of the Oath Keepers right-wing militia group, became one of the leading proponents of an “audit” of the election results. He pressed for a special legislative session to overturn the results and award the state’s electors to Trump.
As much as he wanted to, Finchem did not preside over an official legislative hearing. Bowers refused to authorize it despite Finchem’s repeated requests to hold one at the House of Representatives.

Some lawmakers who attended were clearly starstruck by their sudden proximity to national politics.

Rep. Judy Burges, R-Skull Valley, said of Trump’s team, “They’re so extremely intelligent. You’re just in awe at how much they know.”

Rep. David Cook, R-Globe, said meeting Giuliani was “like meeting a movie star.”

Tense meeting at Capitol exposes divisions

Bowers hadn’t watched the Giuliani meeting the day before, although he heard snippets from a television blaring in his House office. Because Giuliani hadn’t sent the evidence he had promised, Bowers put his attention on other matters.

He recently had prevailed over Finchem to hold onto his title as the House speaker. Winning the battle for the gavel gave Bowers the power to set the chamber’s agenda, decide which bills got heard and help shape the state’s budget.
The 2021 legislative session was nearly upon Bowers, and he needed to prepare. He was at the Capitol, where his artwork — a painting of Cottonwood Wash and a bust of the late Jake Flake, a rancher and Republican state lawmaker — lines the hallway leading to his office, which holds even more art.

During a break from the meeting at the hotel, Giuliani spoke to a House attorney and seemed exasperated. He wanted to be heard by those whose involvement could make a difference.

Bowers agreed to attend a meeting, arranged by the Senate side, a short walk across the Capitol mall complex.

Giuliani brought Jenna Ellis, the lawyer whom he described as his constitutional law expert; retired Col. Phil Waldron, who cast himself as an election security expert; Katherine Friess, a Washington attorney and onetime lobbyist with past ties to Trump allies Roger Stone and Paul Manafort; and Bernard Kerik, a former New York City police chief who later pleaded guilty to felony crimes for lying and tax evasion.

Conservative activist Lyle Rapacki, who makes videos of his friendly interviews with Trump’s allies, joined the meeting late.

Apart from his political videos, Rapacki manages the Yavapai Patriots, a politically active organization. He also provides conservative commentary to the Prescott eNews, a media website that provides a platform for the local Oath Keepers militia group.

In 1990, Rapacki wrote a book about the widespread problem of satanism. In 2019, an investigation for the Washington state Legislature noted Rapacki was part of a small group getting email updates on an effort led by anti-government militant Ammon Bundy to take over a federal wildlife refuge in Oregon in 2016.
Rapacki’s presence puzzled Bowers and House attendees.

But notably absent were Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich and his staff.

The Trump campaign never formally complained to them about an election Trump still describes as “the crime of the century.”

Giuliani’s team showed lawmakers declarations from concerned voters, election observers and others alleging wide-ranging irregularities on Election Day. They had a handout titled “Arizona ‘Fixing the Vote,’” which purported to show evidence of creating votes for Biden.

Waldron spoke about his work in Antrim County, Michigan, where he was involved in an effort that promoted widely debunked claims that votes were manipulated there. He claimed at the meeting something similar had happened in Arizona.

Ellis, meanwhile, claimed the Legislature had the power to do what it wanted with electors. Bowers asked the presenters if they wanted him to break his oath of office. They said they didn’t.

State Sen. Vince Leach, R-Saddlebrooke, Bowers recalled, “pounded and pounded and pounded” Giuliani’s team over its assertions.

At least twice, attendees recalled, Giuliani remarked, “I can’t believe how hostile this meeting is. I thought we were coming to … a friendly crowd.”

Bowers said there was a reason for the tension.

“We were being asked to do something huge, and we thought we were going to get the evidence at the meeting,” he said.

When the meeting ended, Bowers stood up, walked around the table and thanked the group.

He only shook Waldron’s hand.

“I gotta go,” he said.

House staffers never heard from Trump’s team again.

Giuliani, however, sought to remain in contact with Fann.

Three days after the meeting with him at the Senate, One America News personality Christina Bobb emailed Fann on behalf of Giuliani offering what they viewed as pertinent information and a promise of continued contact.

Unlike traditional journalists who report from the sidelines and maintain neutrality, Bobb helped Giuliani organize witnesses for his Nov. 30 meeting with lawmakers.

“Good morning, Ma’am,” Bobb wrote. “Mayor Giuliani asked me to send you these declarations. He will follow up with you as well.”
‘This is a circus. We’re just making it bigger’

Bowers and Fann separately weighed the in-person pitch from Trump’s allies as public pressure from the president’s supporters reached a fevered pitch.

In late November and early December, supporters of President Donald Trump held gatherings at the state Capitol, outside of elections officials’ homes and outside The Arizona Republic/azcentral.com (above). Thomas Hawthorne/The Republic

In early December, Trump supporters gathered for rallies to back the president and to implore legislators to decertify the state’s election results. One at the state Capitol, dubbed “Protect the Vote,” attracted some Republican state lawmakers.

Protesters gathered outside the homes of Bowers and Hickman.

Trump supporters called Bowers a pedophile, pervert and traitor in protests that played out through December outside the family house in a county island near Mesa.

Around the same time, dozens of protesters gathered in Hickman’s neighborhood one night carrying candles and screaming, “Honor your oath! Honor your oath!”

Republicans savaged each other on social media, in part over calls by pro-Trump conservatives for a special legislative session that never happened.

Bowers and Fann kept in near-daily contact and, on Dec. 4, issued a joint statement calling for an independent audit of Maricopa County’s Dominion Voting Systems software and voting machines. That would address the baseless view among some conservatives that the machines were programmed to favor Democrats.
Separately, Bowers released a statement rejecting the calls for a special session by Trump allies.

That statement prompted a phone call from the governor. Ducey told Bowers he had shared his statement with friends. The governor told him he was “proud I was his speaker.”

Four days later, on Dec. 8, Bowers and Fann began meeting over Zoom with Hickman, along with staffers and attorneys for all sides.

They talked cooperatively about various election-related issues. Topics ranged from the sequencing of ballot counting to the status of election-related lawsuits and how an accredited firm could review the Dominion machines. All sides agreed such an audit would give the public a measure of trust in the election systems.

They set another meeting for the next evening, Dec. 9.

That day, Bowers and Fann acknowledged to each other that members of the GOP caucuses still wanted public hearings.

“Karen,” Bowers said, “this is a circus. We’re just making it bigger.”

“I know,” she said, according to his recollection. “But ... I think we need to do something.”

Bowers relented and agreed to a joint House-Senate committee hearing. He placed one condition on the joint committee: There would be no subpoenas demanding the county produce information.

Doing so, he feared, would push the county into a defensive posture and pull lawyers into an unwanted battle.

He and Fann agreed it was crucial they acted in unison.

A joint audit was the kind of move favored by Republican Helen Purcell, the former Maricopa County recorder who oversaw elections for decades. At a gathering of Republican women where Bowers spoke, the two hugged and commiserated over the situation. She encouraged Bowers to do an audit.

“You’re going to find out we did it right,” she said.

When it came to examining the machines, Hickman’s main concern was that it happen only after the county was finished defending itself in court. The county’s lawyers didn’t want anyone touching the same voting machines that could be considered evidence in lawsuits.

The county faced the first of at least eight election-related lawsuits on Nov. 7. A federal judge in Phoenix dismissed one of the cases on Dec. 9, momentarily giving county officials a sense that litigation was behind them.

While the county worked collaboratively with Fann and Bowers, Hickman flew in a pair of officials from Pro V&V, an Alabama company accredited by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, to Phoenix. The men planned to examine the Dominion machines.
Hickman said when the technicians were in the air Dec. 9, he learned that Kelli Ward, Arizona Republican Party chairwoman, planned to appeal the judge’s decision, keeping the county in court.

The men stayed overnight at the Courtyard by Marriott in downtown Phoenix, ate at two restaurants and left Arizona the next day.

“They got to watch a rainstorm,” Hickman said. It cost county taxpayers $3,708.

Suddenly, 'they started mentioning subpoenas'

The Zoom meetings were supposed to focus on how a joint hearing between the Senate and House would work. But in a span of days, Fann inexplicably shifted to a new strategy that didn’t involve the House at all.

At one point, attendees remembered Bowers participating from his front porch. They could hear the “Trump Train” yelling vile insults and honking horns as they drove up and down the street.

Meanwhile, Fann sipped wine in her kitchen and cooked chicken chow mein.

The contrast shocked some on the call.

“I was sitting there slack-jawed,” Hickman said. “We couldn’t even talk, it was so loud. We had to kind of wait for a break because it was coming through. Rusty had to put himself on mute.”

A bigger surprise would come as Fann and Bowers remained the target of national pressure from Trump’s allies.

On Dec. 10, Fann and state Sen. Eddie Farnsworth, R-Gilbert, the chairman of the Senate’s Judiciary Committee and a longtime friend of Biggs, met with county representatives without Bowers and the House.

The senators told county staff they intended to hold an election-related hearing on Dec. 14, without the House. The hearing would be about tabulation processes, not overturning the results, participants said.

It appeared to be the first time the Senate — it’s not clear whether it was Fann, Farnsworth or someone else — formally discussed at length issuing subpoenas to the
The requirement to produce documents or other election materials would put the county and the Senate on an adversarial footing because of the legal issues at stake. That’s why Bowers had opposed subpoenas from the beginning.

County officials were dumbfounded by the proposed maneuver because they already had agreed to appear at the Senate hearing to answer any questions lawmakers had. They had been talking cooperatively with the Senate for days and had the impression they were all moving in the same direction.

“That, all of a sudden, they started mentioning subpoenas,” said a participant on the call, who took contemporaneous notes. “They started talking about what the subpoenas would look like.”

That prompted Tom Liddy, the head of the Civil Division for the Maricopa County Attorney’s Office, to halt the conversation, given the legal implications.

He remembered something Fann said.

“She said, ‘Well, it wouldn't be a normal subpoena. It would be a friendly subpoena,’” Liddy said. “Of course I laughed.”

She asked Liddy to help draft the subpoena, which was immediately ruled out by lawyers for the county and the Senate.

Liddy is a lifelong Republican, a member of former President George W. Bush’s 2000 election legal team and the son of Watergate figure G. Gordon Liddy.

Liddy tried to discourage a subpoena. “You don’t need subpoenas. Just tell us what you want,” Liddy remembered telling Fann.

The timing created additional problems. The Legislature would change in January to reflect those elected in November. Farnsworth was retiring from the Legislature.

Any subpoena from him would expire when his term lapsed. The Senate would need to start over if it still wanted to proceed.

The county had made clear it had hired Pro V&V to address the concerns over Dominion and hoped the collaborative talks a day earlier, which included the voluntary sharing of information with the Legislature, still would prevail.

And another new phrase was gaining prominence. Fann now wanted what she called a “forensic audit.”

The term “forensic audit” in 2020 election parlance dates to at least Nov. 10, a week after Election Day, when now-former Fox Business Network personality Lou Dobbs called on the air for such an action.

Sidney Powell, a lawyer whom Trump’s campaign had just fired, called for a forensic audit of voting machines in a federal lawsuit filed Nov. 25 against Georgia election officials.
On Dec. 2, Trump called for a forensic audit during a 46-minute video speech from the White House in which he said the nation’s election systems were “under coordinated assault and siege.”

During one phone call with Fann, Hickman asked her to explain what forensic audit meant.

“I need a definition here,” he remembered telling her. “I don’t know what you’re looking for. We keep talking about an audit of the machines and you keep talking of a forensic audit.”

“You know, a forensic audit — of everything,” he recalled her saying. “Everything.”

County Supervisor Steve Gallardo, a Democrat who supported an audit or review with parameters, recalled a similar conversation with Fann. During a quick phone call one evening, he asked her to explain what a forensic audit meant.

She laughed, he said. “I don’t know,” he said she told him. Members of her caucus were “beating down” her door, she told him.

Ahead of the Senate’s Dec. 14 Judiciary Committee hearing, Fann told Bowers her caucus was moving ahead on its own.

“OK. Good luck,” he said. It was the last time he and Fann discussed any ballot review-related matter.

County and legislative officials went into the meeting unsure if there would be subpoenas.

Even one Senate staffer who typically would have been prepared for such a momentous event remembered “not knowing for sure” what would happen.

They only found out at the end of the daylong hearing, which took place by video because of the pandemic. Farnsworth announced he would issue subpoenas. The next day, he did.

One of the subpoenas requested records relating to ranked-choice voting, something Arizona doesn’t have. It suggested to Liddy that Farnsworth, a seasoned lawmaker with a keen grasp of the election process, didn’t write it himself.

Without a single formal vote by members of the Senate, Fann and Farnsworth put the chamber on a path to review the Maricopa County ballots.

‘One of the nagging mysteries’

Under pressure from Trump and his supporters, Fann appeared to be looking for a way to defuse the anger. Months later, many still can’t understand her go-it-alone approach.

The surprise subpoenas, which the county immediately challenged, dashed hopes for a cooperative effort to understand the election’s results.

Days later, Bowers expressed his disappointment about the situation to Hickman.
“I wanted you to know I said we would be willing to join the senate in a joint committee but I would not authorize my chairman to subpoena the county,” the speaker wrote in a text to the supervisor.

“The senate went on alone and I am not happy with that outcome.”

Hickman appreciated the outreach in his return text.

“Almost 7 hours of testimony, answering all questions they had...still resulted in a predestined conclusion. I sent Karen a two word text: NOT HAPPY. Thank you for sticking with us. It’s called rational leadership in irrational times and I am positive history will be kind to us.”

Bowers said he still has no idea what led Fann to shift from a cooperative, joint audit to pursue the ballot review that has played out.

“It’s one of the nagging mysteries,” he said.

Trump supporters quickly returned to protesting outside the homes of Bowers, Hickman and others.

The pushback swelled into an effort later that month to try to recall Hickman and other Republicans on the county board. Bowers later faced a similar recall effort.

Hickman worried about his safety and had a protective security detail for the remainder of his tenure as board chairman, which ended Jan. 6.

The subpoenas pushed the county into a battle with the Senate over what the county could produce without creating evidentiary problems in its lawsuit, and without running afoul of state laws over handling ballots.

The fight between the county and the Senate over the subpoenas would spill past Jan. 6, when Congress was required to certify the national election results.

There were more surprises in the final days of the year, with two members of Arizona’s congressional delegation continuing to assert widespread fraud in Maricopa County’s numbers.

On Dec. 21, Gosar, Biggs, Finchem and Gosar’s chief of staff held a two-hour video conference with Bowers.

It featured a presentation from the newly formed Data Integrity Group, whose members described themselves as concerned “numbers guys” who saw things that “didn’t add up.” They gave a similar talk to members of the Georgia state Senate nine days later.
Their presentation was intended to dazzle Bowers, but it started with a disturbing metaphor about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and never provided the kind of concrete evidence the speaker wanted.

“We’re here to basically calm down all these questions, all these people that are saying, ‘Hey, JFK is perfectly alive, and we should just move on with everything.’ We’re here to show you the corpse and the bullet in the back of the head,” said Justin Mealey, a Navy veteran whose professional biography said he had contracted with the Central Intelligence Agency.

“We can prove that early voting could not have occurred as reported without massive fraudulent voting.”

Their analysis was based on a feed of vote tallies, not information directly from the county. They claimed Trump’s vote totals sometimes moved down. Maricopa County officials said their actual data shows all vote totals grew as ballots were counted.

Bowers likened the election result to Politics 101: Voters liked Biden more than Trump. He reminded the presenters of the first presidential debate between the rivals, where Trump and Biden traded insults and talked over each other.

“I saw that debate,” Bowers told the presenters. “I said, ‘The president just lost this race.’”

Finchem wanted Bowers to ask recorders in three other Arizona counties to participate in forensic audits as well.

Bowers agreed to take the group’s concerns to Maricopa County election officials, but without evidence of widespread fraud he refused to throw out the votes of 3.4 million Arizona voters.

When Mealey questioned whether even that figure was reliable, Bowers grew testy.

“Maybe there’s a bot in Bulgaria,” he said. “I don’t want to tie into hysteria.

“I’m not going to throw out the vote and say we’ve got to recount this because there’s one fraudulent vote,” Bowers said.

## A Christmas Eve tour, and more White House calls

The holidays were drawing near, with the congressional certification of the election results scheduled not long after.

The day after the video conference, Bowers pressed on with his fact-finding.

He had been working the phones, asking election officials in other counties how they felt about their election processes at that point. They all felt pretty good.

Bowers took a breather on his front porch after talking to the manager of Coconino County. A Washington, D.C., number popped up on his phone.
“I’m calling for the president. Can you take this call?” a friendly sounding woman on the other end said.

He and Trump talked for 10 minutes. Trump seemed to remember Bowers’ position from their last conversation about trying to get him to decertify the election. But it also seemed Trump hadn’t been told that Bowers had deemed Guiliani’s efforts “breathtaking” and illegal.

“I’m all about every legal way to help,” he told the president.

The men wished each other a Merry Christmas.

Trump didn’t ask Bowers for anything.

The speaker thought the call was a “nice” gesture from a man he could like aside from his tweets and other personal characteristics.

“I feel many times like I’m Charlie Chaplin teetering down the alley with my little hat, digging out fish bones ... and then leaning against the door and falling into the king’s ball,” he said of an experience that seemed surreal.

Two days later, on Christmas Eve morning, Maricopa County election officials met with Bowers, his majority leader, Rep. Ben Toma, R-Peoria, and their staff.

They got a full rundown of how elections in the state’s biggest county work, from start to finish.

For hours, election officials showed them how they prepare for elections, how tabulation machines work, protocols for touching ballots, and the vault that holds the ballots.

They saw the Dominion machines were not hooked up to the internet, contrary to one conspiracy. In a conference room, the lawmakers and staff were handed test ballots and markers for a demonstration disproving the Sharpiegate theory.

Even on this tour, the county enforced its prohibition against allowing unauthorized people to enter the area where ballots were stored.
Election officials disproved the Data Integrity team’s presentation, in some cases slide-by-slide. The county rebutted claims of vote injections for any party.

That same day, Giuliani reached out to two of Hickman’s Republican colleagues on the board: Bill Gates and Jack Sellers.

“I’m hoping we could have a chance to have a conversation,” a transcription of Giuliani’s message to Sellers said. “I’d like to see if there’s a way that we can resolve this so that it comes out well for everyone. We’re all Republicans, I think we have the same goal. ... Let’s see if we can get this done outside of the court, gosh.”

Sellers did not return the call.

Trump and his allies weren’t done yet.

On New Year’s Eve, while Hickman was on a dinner date with his wife and friends, his phone rang. He didn’t recognize the phone number coming from Washington, D.C., and let it go to voicemail, then listened to the message.

The White House switchboard wanted him to call back so he could talk to the president. He didn’t call back.

On Jan. 3, Trump called Hickman, who again didn’t answer. Hickman saw the Washington Post had just reported that Trump had pressured Georgia’s secretary of state to “find” enough votes to make Trump the winner in that state.

The next day, John Eastman, dean of Chapman University's law school in Orange, California, laid out a legal theory to Bowers and his staff.

Eastman has radical views on the law. He controversially argued in Newsweek that Vice President Kamala Harris was ineligible for her office because her parents were immigrants, a fringe view that helped lead him to retire from Chapman under pressure.
On this day, Eastman explained how and why Arizona’s electors should be rejected before the upcoming meeting of Congress to formally certify the electoral results.

Almost all the examples Eastman cited in his reasoning for dismissing the results of Arizona’s election stemmed from Georgia, Pennsylvania and elsewhere, those in attendance recalled.

“You’re the president’s lawyer, and I appreciate you’re doing this job,” Bowers said. “Has this ever been done before?”

No, Eastman said. But he encouraged them to give the strategy a shot and let Trump’s legal team worry about the litigation.

“It’s never been done in the history of the country,” Bowers said, “and I’m going to do that in Arizona? No.”

A final push on a fateful January day

Behind the scenes, Biggs made one final push to change the election.

He called Bowers, a longtime East Valley Republican associate, on the morning of Jan. 6 and asked if he would support decertifying Arizona’s electors. Bowers said he would not.

On that day — when Congress was to certify presidential election results — Trump and his allies spoke to thousands of his supporters from the Ellipse, a park south of the White House.

“States want to revote,” Trump said. “The states got defrauded. They were given false information. They voted on it, now they want to recertify. They want it back.”

Biggs later stood on the floor of the House of Representatives and urged his colleagues to set aside electors from Arizona, Georgia and other states, arguing the election rules in those states had shifted during the voting period and thwarted the Legislature’s control over how to select its electors.

“The Arizona Legislature seeks an independent audit of the election,” Biggs told the House, perhaps leaving the impression that both of the state’s legislative chambers were moving to do so.

Before the House voted to reject Biggs’ arguments, hundreds of Trump supporters broke into the U.S. Capitol, sparking a deadly riot.

*Includes information from Arizona Republic reporter Mary Jo Pitzl.*
Supporters of President Donald Trump protest outside the Arizona Capitol in Phoenix on Nov. 7, 2020, after Joe Biden was declared the winner of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. THOMAS HAWTHORNE/THE REPUBLIC

The narrative of a stolen election encouraged Arizona Senate President Karen Fann to push ahead with a partisan ballot review. The battle over election materials came to a climax during a vote in which one Republican senator made all the difference.

Ronald J. Hansen and Yvonne Wingett Sanchez, Arizona Republic
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The day Congress certified the 2020 election results, then-President Donald Trump and his allies addressed thousands of his supporters from the Ellipse, a park south of the White House.

The “Save America Rally” on the raw, wind-whipped day of Jan. 6 wasn’t the last gasp of a failed candidate coming to terms with the looming loss of power. It was fresh impetus to continue challenging the 2020 presidential results.

And Arizonans joined the fight.

“We’re going to walk down to the Capitol, and we’re going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women,” Trump said. “We’re probably not going to be
cheering so much for some of them, because you’ll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength, and you have to be strong.”

Up to that point, Trump and his allies had cajoled and pressured officials in Georgia to little effect. In Arizona, Trump’s efforts had yielded only subpoenas from the state Senate seeking election materials from Maricopa County, and the matter was quickly tied up in court.

The rhetoric of Trump and his allies grew more desperate as the days to change the election results dwindled.

U.S. Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz., who had falsely claimed on Twitter 700,000 votes were stolen, was at the Ellipse. He tweeted a picture of the crowd. “Biden should concede. I want his concession on my desk tomorrow morning. Don’t make me come over there,” Gosar wrote.

Onstage, Rudy Giuliani, Trump’s lawyer, cited a law professor’s theory that Vice President Mike Pence had the authority to send electoral results back to certain states to have their legislatures pick electors.

“We now have letters from five legislatures begging us to do that,” Giuliani told the crowd. “They’re asking us. Georgia, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Wisconsin, and one other coming in.”

It wasn’t true.

The Arizona Legislature had not convened in months. House Speaker Rusty Bowers, R-Mesa, didn’t back the subpoenas sent to the county to force the handover of election material, or an effort to set aside the state’s electors.

Instead, state Rep. Mark Finchem, R-Oro Valley, a staunch Trump supporter, wrote Pence a letter signed by some of his GOP colleagues and gathered material he considered evidence of fraud. He headed to Washington.
Finchem and one of his like-minded conservative colleagues, then-Rep. Anthony Kern, R-Glendale, made their way to the U.S. Capitol as a pro-Trump mob broke in to pressure Congress to reverse Trump’s loss.

As rioters fought their way into the inner sanctums of the Senate and House of Representatives, Finchem posted a photo on social media looking up at a crowd amassed on the east steps of the Capitol. One person stood on top of a vehicle.

“What happens when the People feel they have been ignored, and Congress refuses to acknowledge rampant fraud,” he wrote.

Arizonan Jake Angeli, the so-called “QAnon Shaman,” was one of the most distinctive insurrectionists inside, with his face paint, bull-horn headgear and spear. He was only part of the flourishing extremist movement in Arizona that includes the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers and Three Percenters.

And in the same building, Republican Reps. Andy Biggs and Gosar led the effort to render the votes of 3.4 million of their state’s residents irrelevant by attempting to prevent Arizona’s electoral college votes from being counted.

The deadly riot failed to overturn the results. Congress certified Joe Biden’s presidential win after hours of violence and bloodshed.

But the narrative of a stolen election pressed by Trump, Gosar and Biggs, and echoed by millions of the president’s followers, encouraged state Senate President Karen Fann, R-Prescott, to push ahead with a partisan ballot review.

And so Arizona, with the closest presidential race in the nation, found its way back into the spotlight as a hotbed of partisan extremism and a magnet for those pushing election conspiracies.

Fann battled the Maricopa County supervisors — nearly all Republican — to inspect ballots and election equipment, as well as other fellow Republicans who viewed the review process as ill-conceived.
Her effort created novel legal concerns over how far legislative inquiry can reach into election administration. It led to lingering personal rifts among elected officials. And it gave birth to a review that showed, regardless of the results, many Arizona Republicans would not let go of Trump. In a four-month investigation, The Arizona Republic examined a trove of text messages, emails and court records, many made public after suing the state for access. Republic reporters spoke to decision-makers, consultants, staff, contractors, campaign aides and others tied to the review of the presidential and U.S. Senate races in Maricopa County. Some talked on the record about their experiences, while others spoke on the condition they not be identified in order to speak candidly about private conversations.

Trump and many of those who backed the ballot review, such as Fann, did not respond to repeated requests to discuss their recollections.

Those who know Fann and did speak said she sought to quell the anger over Trump’s loss and could not resist the pressure campaign from his allies. The resulting partisan ballot review shredded the Senate’s relations with the most populous county in the state and undermined public confidence in elections.

Others involved offered vivid accounts of how the events leading up to the recount unfolded before the spectacle itself began.

Dominion voting machines were OK a year before the Capitol assault

It’s almost forgotten now, but there was a moment in 2020 when the Arizona Legislature adopted bipartisan legislation in cooperation with Maricopa County to ensure faster, more accurate vote counts.
Once reliably Republican, Arizona has evolved into a more competitive political landscape. That shift is most evident in Maricopa County, which accounted for about 76% of the state’s voters in 2020.

Trump won Arizona in 2016, though by slimmer margins than Republicans usually tally. But former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, his friend and political ally, lost that night. So did Helen Purcell, the longtime Republican county recorder who oversaw elections.

Her successor, Democrat Adrian Fontes, sparked immediate suspicion from Republicans about the county’s elections. That only grew after the 2018 elections, which were the most successful for Democrats in decades.

The U.S. Senate race between Democrat Kyrsten Sinema and Republican Martha McSally became a flashpoint for some conservatives. McSally led balloting on election night. Over six days, her lead dwindled and eventually disappeared. Sinema won by 2.3 percentage points.

The slow-motion defeat caught Trump’s eye.

He tweeted about “Electoral corruption — Call for a new Election? We must protect our Democracy!” and explained his concerns to reporters in Washington.

“But it is interesting — it always seems to go the way of the Democrats,” he said. “Now, in Arizona, all of a sudden, out of the wilderness, they find a lot of votes. And she’s — the other candidate — is just winning by a hair.”

After those elections, the state and Maricopa County took steps to ensure better election management.
The Republican-controlled Legislature changed state law to give all counties two weeks instead of one to process and count the votes cast before Election Day. In a state where nearly 80% of ballots are cast before Election Day, that meant officials could release a more complete count on the night of the elections.

Meanwhile, Maricopa County upgraded its voting machines from a system in place since 1996.

After close inspections of several alternatives, county officials purchased more than 1,000 machines and other vote counting equipment from Colorado-based Dominion Voting Systems in 2019. One feature of the new machines was “electronic adjudication,” which essentially allowed digital copies of ballots to be reviewed when voter intent was less than obvious because of stray or faint marks or smudges.

The feature would allow officials to focus on a single race where machines could not determine voters’ intent and quickly inspect their choices. But Arizona’s election laws didn’t specifically allow the use of such a tool, so county officials went to the Legislature.

That effort resulted in Senate Bill 1135, sponsored by then-Sen. Eddie Farnsworth, R-Gilbert, who chaired the Senate Judiciary Committee. Fann and Bowers co-sponsored the measure, along with Democratic Party leaders in the House and Senate.

At an early hearing on the bill, Farnsworth engaged in friendly banter with Republican county Supervisor Steve Chucri with a representative from Dominion present.

“There’s nobody in opposition,” Farnsworth said of the bill, before complimenting Chucri on his suit.

The softball exchange belied the more serious concerns lawmakers already had explored in some depth with the county and the vote-machine manufacturer.

Before the hearing, 11 state lawmakers examined the machines and toured Maricopa County’s election facilities over two trips to the building south of downtown Phoenix.

The first visit came on Jan. 6, 2020, one year before the riot at the Capitol. It featured some of those who would later be among the most prominent to challenge the 2020 election results: Kern and then-Rep. Kelly Townsend, R-Mesa.

The county showed them the tabulators were not connected to the internet and performed tests to show how votes the machines initially were unable to read were handled and counted. Some lawmakers followed up with written questions to the county in a sign of their scrutiny.

In the end, SB 1135 passed both chambers unanimously and became the first law enacted in 2020.

The comity didn’t last.
Randy Pullen, other Trump advocates work behind the scenes

After Biden’s victory, Republicans in Arizona and across America pushed Trump’s unfounded claims of fraud and called for audits intended to expose the alleged cheating. Only a handful of people were needed to bring such reviews to life. And most of the persuading took place out of the public eye.

Trump and Giuliani privately pressed Fann to examine the 2020 election results. It reflected Trump’s confidence he would win the state dating to the earliest days of his first presidential campaign.

But they had other allies. One of those pushing for an election review was longtime Arizona political operative Randy Pullen, a former state Republican Party chair and certified public accountant.

For months, he was one of the more secretive figures in the process. Beginning in December 2020 and then working behind the scenes for months more, Pullen quietly urged a ballot review in Arizona, helped shape the Senate’s deal with the lead contractor for it, consulted on social-media strategy and was a conduit for private fundraising. Long before Pullen was publicly identified as a “co-liaison,” he was devising a plan for what he described as an “audit.”

His efforts gained momentum as Trump allies’ attempts to discredit election results collapsed in courtrooms.

After Jan. 6, when Congress certified the results, loyalists pivoted to an audit-centered strategy. It was rebranded as a review of election integrity, but it kept alive Trump’s claims of a stolen election.

Pullen had direct communication with Fann dating to at least February.

Pullen, 72, had twice run for mayor of Phoenix, finished third in a four-way GOP primary for state treasurer and has worked in conservative politics for decades. As state party chairman, he helped press the party in Arizona rightward.

He led the Arizona GOP during then-President Barack Obama’s first term. But Pullen’s tenure was perhaps more memorable for its intraparty battles at that time.

Then-Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who was running for reelection in 2010, did not trust Pullen and used his influence to help redirect money from the state GOP and into the coffers of the Yuma County GOP, which marginalized the state organization under Pullen’s leadership.
Pullen also served for a time as treasurer of the Republican National Committee and tapped his connections there.

On the night of Dec. 8, he texted Trump’s former chief of staff, Reince Priebus, a man he had known and worked with for years. Priebus headed the Wisconsin Republican Party when Pullen headed Arizona's. In addition, Pullen was the RNC treasurer when Priebus was its general counsel.

“I worked with a data scientist to design an audit of the digital ballot images,” Pullen wrote. “Incredible.”

He wrote that he sent a summary of the idea to the county’s Board of Supervisors and legislative leaders: “Crickets. They don’t want anything that would show the election was a fraud.”

Priebus didn’t text back. Days later, on the evening of Dec. 14, after the state Senate announced it would issue subpoenas to the county for election materials, Pullen texted Priebus: “We won. Doing forensic audit in AZ.”

Priebus replied, “What? Call u tomorrow am ??”

That same day, Pullen sent an email to Jovan Pulitzer, who had developed controversial ballot-inspection methods. The Senate has so far withheld the full contents of that email, saying it was not related to the ballot review and predated Pullen’s official work on the review.

Pullen’s communication to Pulitzer came the day Fann and Farnsworth held the only legislative hearing to acquire election materials from the county. The initial subpoenas had not yet been formally issued.

In the series of text messages to Priebus, an attorney, Pullen called the coming ballot review a lawyer’s “dreams come true.”

The Senate has withheld many other documents related to the review, citing internal legislative discussions or attorney-client privilege. The Arizona Republic has gone to court asking that many of these documents be released to the public.

Tensions between Senate, county grow in new year, new leadership

Less than a week after the Jan. 6 riot, the Arizona Senate and Maricopa County officials remained at legal loggerheads over ballots and election machines from November. Both had new leaders in key spots.

On Jan. 12, Fann and state Sen. Warren Petersen, R-Gilbert, who replaced the retired Farnsworth as chairman of the Judiciary Committee, issued a subpoena to the county for its 2.1 million ballots and election equipment.

The new subpoena continued a fight that Fann and Farnsworth had ignited in mid-December with separate subpoenas that expired as the county contested them in court.
The subpoenas legally required the county to provide the Senate its ballots, equipment and voter records and carried the possibility of jail if ignored.

Soon after, county officials began providing the Senate with election data and publicly available voting records. They did not release the ballots and tabulation equipment.

With Fann, just reelected Senate president, exerting her authority, quiet concern grew among Senate staff.

After the January subpoena, Clint Hickman, a Republican county supervisor, texted his friend Wendy Baldo, the Senate’s longtime chief of staff, who reported to Fann.

The county did not want to fight with the Senate, said Hickman, who headed the board in December when it challenged the initial subpoenas. He wanted the county to move forward with an independent audit of its election-machine equipment, not a state-forced review.

“It is because of (Arizona Republican Party Chairwoman) Kelli Ward and grandstanding members of the legislature appealing to a Base that is shrinking by the minute,” he wrote. “We need to get on with this audit. Litigation needs to be dropped. Karen got her leadership ... now she needs to lead all of us out of this mess.”

Baldo was known as a fierce extension of the leaders she served. She faithfully backed GOP leadership, even when she didn’t agree with the party’s individual members.
Along with some other staff members, Baldo believed an audit of the election results by experienced professionals could be a useful tool to demonstrate that elections were conducted fairly. By the time of the January subpoena, however, Baldo was sympathetic to Hickman.

“Clint. I am trying very hard to push the people I work for to stop this nonsense,” she replied. “I am on the county side on this. I will do everything I can.”

Within days, Baldo indicated to Hickman there was little she could do.

“I have stayed a little detached (from) this because I am disgusted with this,” she said. “My leadership knows it.”

Baldo, who retired in July, switched her party affiliation to Libertarian.

By early February, the Senate Republican majority was increasingly irritated by the county supervisors’ intransigence. Fann pushed toward an extraordinary showdown with the supervisors for failing to fully respond to the subpoenas.

Fann already had contacted a little-known firm out of Sarasota, Florida, that would lead the election review.

Jack Sellers had replaced Hickman as the chairman of the supervisors in January as part of the county’s periodic rotation in leadership.

Sellers, like Fann, is a lifelong Republican with a background in municipal government and an interest in transportation. He served on the state transportation board for years.

Fann owned a transportation-related company, and her family did, too.

Sellers symbolizes a more civil era in politics. At 78, he is a soft-spoken man who wears a suit jacket and pocket square to greet visitors at his office, even in a pandemic. During his two terms on the Chandler City Council, Sellers learned to watch debates unfold before revealing his own views, in part to leave room for his own mind to change as needed.

Sellers hoped his friendship with Fann and his genteel demeanor could help bring the county’s relations with the Senate to a more collaborative point.

They talked frequently, and he usually left those meetings feeling optimistic. Like Hickman, Sellers said the county would work cooperatively on an audit with the Senate if she hired a “qualified company.”

Fann maintained to him the ballot review was about improving election procedures, not about overturning the election results. But at the same time, Sellers saw social media posts from other Republicans showing they had not given up on changing the results.
As Sellers discussed the subpoena with Fann, the county moved ahead on its own with a pair of independent audits intended to dispel doubts about its election operations.

By early February, county officials hired the only two firms in the nation accredited by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission to certify voting systems.

The county invited members of the Legislature and staff from the offices of the governor, the attorney general and secretary of state to observe the work done by Pro V&V of Alabama and SLI Compliance of Colorado. Each firm conducted audits separate from the other.

Around the same time, Fann and all of the other Senate Republicans drafted language for Senate Resolution 1005, a measure to hold the Board of Supervisors in contempt of the Senate for failing to comply with both rounds of subpoenas.

The resolution, which had an erroneous date for the December subpoenas, named all five supervisors and said they “have repeatedly and willfully delayed and obstructed a vital and duly authorized investigation by the Arizona Senate.”

‘They feel like you guys are thumbing your nose at the power of the Senate’

The contempt resolution, crafted by elected Republicans against other elected Republicans, escalated the dispute to a frightening level for the supervisors. They believed in the integrity of the county’s vote count, believed they were following federal election law — but feared going to jail.

Republican county Supervisor Bill Gates couldn’t believe it.

Gates, 50, is a Harvard-educated lawyer for the PING golf company. In the mid-2000s, he led the Arizona Republican Party’s election-integrity efforts that involved organizing poll watchers and lawyers to ensure eligible votes were counted.

He reached out to Sen. Paul Boyer, R-Glendale, who was seen as a swing vote but had signed onto SR 1005.

Gates asked Boyer why he did so.
“The pressure that they put on me was awful,” Boyer told Gates. “The Senate is upset. They feel like you guys are thumbing your nose at the power of the Senate, and they just can’t allow this to stand.”

County officials didn’t think state law authorized the release of ballots, even to the Legislature. In court papers seeking to block a contempt vote, the county noted that federal election rules prohibit handing over the voting machines to anyone not certified to handle them. Just giving the machines to the Senate could render the machinery unusable.

Gates made a less-formal appeal to Boyer. He sent Boyer a column by The Arizona Republic’s Robert Robb that argued the Senate was abusing its subpoena power. Robb, a respected conservative-libertarian voice who has watched the state’s politics for decades, thought Senate Republicans were unfairly trying to “act as judge, jury and jailer.” He urged both sides to move on and leave Trump voters “to their delusions.”

“Do I even bother?” Gates wondered before sending Boyer a link to the column.

Boyer, 44, is a deliberative man.

He has taught Latin to junior high school students, and studies Greek as he seeks a master’s degree. He casually invokes Shakespeare in conversation.

More than once, Boyer has rescued his bills from the brink of failure.

In 2019, Boyer withheld his support of the state budget to force his colleagues to back legislation that expanded the time frame for people who claim they were sexually abused as children to sue their alleged abusers and institutions.

This year, he passed a bill that had languished last year to make it easier for firefighters with certain cancers to access workers’ compensation.

Boyer also had experienced the gut-churning angst of a tight election race. On election night in 2020, he went to bed thinking he had lost but woke up at 2:30 a.m. to learn he had pulled ahead.
Boyer thought the county did a good job with its elections. An audit seemed reasonable, but he wasn’t obsessed with it like some of his colleagues. He had serious concerns about holding the board in contempt, and the notion of possible jail time was unthinkable.

Petersen, another longtime friend of Biggs whom Fann had named chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, kept telling him, “They’re lying to us ... They’ve been dragging this out for months,” Boyer recalled.

The weekend before a vote on the contempt resolution, Boyer thought about the Robb column while in Mexico as part of a ministry retreat. He read it, prayed about it and weighed the decision before him.

Hickman, meanwhile, texted Baldo, the Senate chief of staff. He told her about “incursions” and protests at his home — one on a Sunday night that drew 90 angry people that evoked fears of the riot at the U.S. Capitol. It kept his wife and kids locked inside.

“I can tell you the first person that comes to my house in hopes of utilizing a Citizen arrest clause, I will directly blame Representatives of the Senate with leadership in first place,” he wrote. “Sounds very familiar to Jan 6th. Only worse when it comes to my family.”

“I don’t know what to say,” she texted back. “This is out of my hands. I am very very sorry.”

That Sunday, on Feb. 7, Gates sat down in the living room of his Phoenix home to watch the Super Bowl, a rare respite from the drama hanging over his family. His phone rang.

It was Boyer.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about this a lot,” Gates recalled the lawmaker telling him. Boyer wondered if there was any chance to get Sellers and Fann in a room one last time before the contempt vote scheduled the next day.

“You know me, I’m always open,” Gates told him. “We can discuss this and see if we can figure something out.”

Gates worked the phone with renewed urgency and only watched about 10 minutes of the game.

**A tense meeting, and one last try for a deal**

Early the next morning, Gates, Sellers, and Boyer gathered in Fann’s office at the state Capitol.

The supervisors sat on a couch. Fann and Boyer sat in chairs facing them.

Gates laid out his case: The supervisors were in court over the subpoenas, seeking direction from a judge. They had asked for an expedited hearing.
By the county’s reading of the law, the ballots and machines had to remain locked up for a certain period after the election. Either way, he said, the county needed clarity from the court, and a judge would decide soon.

“You would bring a contempt action when you had someone who’s flaunting a subpoena,” Gates remembered saying. “We’re in court to get direction. You don’t need to do this. Why would you?”

Fann crossed her arms at times and seemed irritated. “It’s going on the board today,” she said, meaning a vote was imminent.

Fann acted as though there was nothing she could do to prevent the vote from happening, Gates, Sellers and Boyer recalled in separate interviews.

“You’re the Senate president, you can stop this,” Boyer thought to himself.

Gates switched from a legalistic argument to an emotional plea. He told Fann his daughter had asked, “Dad, when are you going to jail?”

Fann bristled.

“We’re not going to jail you,” she told him.

“Karen, you cannot assure me of that,” Gates replied. “You may think that right now, but if you guys want to hold us in contempt, within two hours, the same people that have been emailing and calling you are going to demand that we be jailed or detained in some way, and you’re not going to be able to stop that.”

Fann, who had known Gates for a long time, stared at him.

The prospect of citizen intervention seemed especially combustible with the memory of the Capitol riot only a month earlier and the recent protests at the homes of county supervisors, lawmakers and others.

If Gates’ comment about his daughter had left Fann unmoved, it stayed with Boyer.

“We have to take contempt off the table,” Boyer recalled telling Fann.

She didn’t respond, he said.

“What’s the plan?” Gates asked her.

“I’m not going to put you guys in jail,” she said. “I’m not going to have you arrested or anything.”

“That isn’t my question,” he said. “My question is: What would you do with that?”

Fann said she would turn over the matter to the attorney general.

“That’s all we need to hear,” Gates said.

With that, Boyer, Gates and Sellers got up and walked out of Fann’s office.

Boyer didn’t talk to the supervisors as they left.
It was unusual for Fann to meet privately with Boyer, and he thought his request for the 11th-hour talks with the county should have suggested he had serious misgivings against the resolution.

But Boyer had co-sponsored the language of the resolution, and he never explicitly told Fann he would vote against it. No one on her leadership team asked him how he intended to vote, he recalled.

Instead, Boyer worked with Mike Philipsen, then the Senate GOP’s spokesperson, on a statement indicating his objection to the contempt resolution. Boyer asked Philipsen to tinker with it.

Philipsen was with Fann after talking with Boyer and before the vote.

“I thought that was enough” to convey his opposition, Boyer said.

The supervisors plotted in their own minds potential scenarios if the contempt resolution passed: Which law enforcement authority would arrest them? Would it be the sergeant-at-arms? Would they have to do “perp” walks? Where would they be held? Which court would have jurisdiction over the proceedings?

There was no precedent. Not even the county’s most experienced lawyers could say with certainty what would come next. The county’s lawyers prepared for various scenarios. One involved filing an injunction in the hopes of preventing the Senate’s vote. Another scenario would have asked a judge for a restraining order to prevent arrests by the sergeant-at-arms.

Sellers had been asked to approve filing an injunction before the meeting with Fann. He had declined, hoping to change the trajectory of the conversations.

Gates returned to his office atop the county administration building in downtown Phoenix. Anticipating his arrest, he shot what he called a “political suicide video” that explained his position on the situation.

“By state law, your ballots are sealed and protected after an election,” he said. “We cannot legally give them to the Senate. ... We cannot give them to anyone without a court order. The Senate has asked us to violate the law, and we won’t.”

He directed viewers to the Legislature’s website for members’ contact information. He arranged for his chief of staff to post the video in the event he couldn’t.

The Senate votes: One member’s choice made the difference

In the meantime, Fann moved ahead with the only vote on the ballot review that the entire Senate ever considered.

Until this vote, Fann and her two judiciary chairs had issued the subpoenas, held one hearing, and waged a war of words against the county in an effort to review the 2020 election results practically on their own.
The contempt vote was the only chance for senators to hold a formal, public vote on the issue. For some, it was as much about preserving the chamber’s authority as it was about the ballot review.

About 40 minutes before the Senate’s afternoon floor session began, Boyer sent Gates an email. He planned to vote “no.”

“I’ve always said so long as there’s hope for both sides to work with one another, I want to do all I can in my limited power to have us work amicably together,” said Boyer’s prepared statement. “We still have time to work together on this.”

Republicans hold a 16-14 edge in the state Senate, meaning the defection of even one of their members is enough to torpedo a measure that otherwise runs along party lines.

Democrats had never indicated support for the ballot review, so a Boyer vote against the resolution would sink it.

Gates, who was watching the Senate on his iPad in his office, told his chief of staff. His chief spread the news to aides for the other supervisors, who were watching the Senate proceedings from a nearby conference room.
If Boyer could withstand the pressure about to be unleashed on him during the vote, the supervisors would be spared.

Hickman, who had retained a personal attorney because of the ordeal, reached out to Sen. T.J. Shope, R-Coolidge. Shope also carried a reputation as a movable vote.

During a text exchange with Hickman weeks earlier about the extended legal battle between the county and the Senate, Shope noted that he was “so sick of all this s---.” Days before the contempt vote, Shope had texted Hickman, “I’m doing what I can here.”

This time, Hickman wrote to Shope: “I am very sure there is a no vote, maybe he could use some company. And if you are ready to jump on that island I will keep calling other legislators. I have never grandstanded against anyone in the legislature. Don’t plan to start now.”

Shope responded only with a thumbs-up on the text.

Minutes later, Hickman sought to persuade another potential swing vote. He texted Sen. Sine Kerr, R-Buckeye. Hickman, an executive from a prominent West Valley family that runs an egg company, and Kerr, a well-known dairy farmer, have known each other for years.

“Sine, I am pretty sure there are a few No votes out of R’s for contempt,” Hickman wrote. “Please do not participate in a vote that will bring protesters to my home and family. There are already people on social media talking about using Citizen’s arrests to our exposed addresses.”

He added, “This has gone on too long. I look forward to working with you as we continue our certified audits.”

Boyer, meanwhile, stood in the hushed chamber and spoke into a microphone. His voice shook.

“My no vote today will give the board time to resolve itself on how to legally proceed with providing these public records for independent sunshine and scrutiny, while also providing 100% protection for the private nature of an individual’s vote.”

As he spoke, Sen. Rick Gray’s eyes widened.
The Republican majority leader from Sun City, whose job is to keep the caucus together, sat in front of Boyer. He swiveled around to look at Boyer. Gray appeared shocked.

Overall, Boyer said he thought the supervisors had no disagreement with audits of the 2020 election but needed confidence and direction from a court.

“Make no mistake, today’s vote merely provides a little bit more time for us to work together charitably and amicably as friends for the sole purpose of gaining more clarity,” Boyer said. “It is not a final determination, nor is it the end of this process.”

The names of all 14 Democrats lit up red, signaling their opposition to the resolution. So did Boyer’s.

The names of all of the other Republicans lit up green as they registered their support — including Shope and Kerr.

Boyer said Gray told him after his remarks that Boyer had stabbed him in the back.

Starting with Petersen, the judiciary committee chair, some inveighed against the county and tried to convince Boyer to change his vote.

“They thought they could peel off one of our Republican senators,” Petersen said. “It sounds like they may have. I hope that’s not the case. I hope that changes.”

Sen. Sonny Borrelli, the GOP whip whose job is counting Republican votes ahead of time, took his turn.

He described “a power struggle between a political subdivision” that was “trying to cover their butts.”

The retired Marine gunnery sergeant from Lake Havasu City and proponent of the “Stop the Steal” movement accused lawmakers of allowing the county board to “trample” their authority. “I hope you reconsider,” Borelli shot in the direction of Boyer’s desk.

Around then, Gray texted Hickman: “Listen to my comments coming shortly on the floor.”

Gray was aggravated. He said he’d received tens of thousands of emails from voters “who don’t believe the system is working.” It was “egregious that we just blow off” their concerns without thoroughly reviewing election procedures.

“I talked with my county supervisor multiple times as we were going through this process to tell him we just want our voters to have certainty,” he said, referring to Hickman.

“And I’m not talking about a superficial audit that they’re doing now. I’m talking about a forensic audit.”

Gray said he had considered Hickman a friend, but he was upset the supervisor had cast the Senate’s efforts as a way to overturn the election results.

“He’s made the Senate look bad in the media,” Gray said. “Is that the kind of government we want?”
His voice quaking, Gray ended, “I am utterly, utterly, utterly disappointed with our Board of Supervisors ... They care more about protecting themselves than really showing that their system worked thoroughly.”

He then voted “Aye.”

All attention pivoted to the Senate president, who seemed painfully embarrassed.

“I’m going to explain my vote, and plead for one of our members to please change their votes, if at all possible,” she said. “Needless to say, I would not have put this on the board had I not been under the impression and was told that we had 16 solid votes. Had I been told that there wasn’t, perhaps we would have talked about this before it went up on the board.”

Fann said the contempt resolution was “about the Constitution,” not about friendships. She criticized the county’s audits and said she had proposed alternatives: “They still said no.”

“So I’m sorry to say this is why we’re at where we’re at right now,” she said. The resolution was not meant to be “hateful” but rather a procedural move required to compel the information.

Boyer held firm, and the measure failed on a 15-15 vote.

By failing to pass the resolution, Fann said, the chamber had undermined its own power. Others agreed.

Sen. J.D. Mesnard, R-Chandler, said he was astounded by the contempt the supervisors had shown the Senate’s authority and was offended they considered asking for a court to intervene. The power of the institution was forever damaged: “It means that people will know they can ignore a subpoena and that there isn’t, you know, likely consequence to that.”

The day after the contempt vote, Fann summoned Boyer back to her office.

“You know you still have three days to change your mind?” she said, according to Boyer.

“I looked her in the eye and said, ‘Karen, you could give me three years and I’m not changing my vote.’”

Boyer quickly felt the wrath of Trump supporters.

His phone blew up with calls and texts from angry people all over the country. In one day, he received 9,000 text messages.

State, county, and local police provided security at various points; Boyer got another phone. Over three nights, his family stayed at three different locations.

There was another move as well.

He found his Senate desk had moved to the left side of the chamber’s aisle, with the Democrats. The GOP caucus never added his new number to its group text messages.
On Feb. 23, two weeks after the contempt vote, county officials announced the two independent firms they had hired separately concluded the election equipment used by the county worked properly.

With legal costs and security expenses, the Senate’s ballot review cost taxpayers nearly $425,000 by early September. Private donors chipped in at least $7 million for a process Cyber Ninjas said cost $9 million overall.

By contrast, the county audits cost taxpayers about $65,000. The county paid another $65,000 to an accounting firm to review its contracts with Dominion Voting Systems and verify the county properly leased the equipment.

On Feb. 26, Maricopa County Superior Court Judge Timothy Thomason upheld the Senate subpoenas. The county supervisors didn’t appeal the ruling, clearing the way for the Senate to access its ballots and tabulation machines.

Hundreds of people flocked to “The Mike Lindell Election Integrity, Faith and Freedom” event on March 10, 2021, which was sponsored by We the People Alliance AZ. It featured a mix of Arizona politicians, a nationalist preacher and social media personalities.

ROBERT ANGLEN/THE REPUBLIC

In Queen Creek, a surreal scene: ‘We are chosen for such a time as this by God’

By then, Trump supporters were eager for a ballot review they expected would vindicate their belief in a stolen election. A well-heeled ally helped give a revival feel to one event in suburban Queen Creek.

On March 10, hundreds of people flocked to a gated lakeside community to see a mix of Arizona politicians, a nationalist preacher and social media personalities.

The Arizona Republican Party promoted “The Mike Lindell Election Integrity, Faith and Freedom” event, which was sponsored by We the People Alliance AZ.
Porsches and deluxe SUVs outnumbered pickup trucks, suggesting attendees were more privileged than populist. At the entrance, people were asked to sign recall petitions against Republican Gov. Doug Ducey and the GOP-led Maricopa County Board of Supervisors because of their resistance to an election “audit.”

They also watched a video of Mike Lindell, the CEO of My Pillow, whose fealty to Trump has made him one of the former president’s most visible cheerleaders.

Trump was the rightful president, Lindell said, and he knew of "miracles" to prove it.

Lyle Rapacki, a conservative activist in Yavapai County who has spread the narrative of a stolen election, mentioned the meetings Trump’s allies had with Fann and other Arizona legislators in November and December.

State Rep. Walt Blackman, R-Snowflake, who is running for Congress, called Trump a modern-day Moses and said people were waiting for God to speak the truth to them.

Later, Lindell said it was too dangerous to leave his home state to appear in person at the event.

He repeated baseless allegations about Dominion’s voting machines and promised he would, within six weeks, expose the fraud to the country. He also promised Arizona’s ballot review would reveal fraud, and Trump would return to office before summer’s end.

Those in attendance raised their hands and called on God to protect Lindell and to “bind up our enemy.”

"Arizona is going to pave the way," Lindell said to cheers. "We are chosen for such a time as this by God."

*Includes information from Arizona Republic reporters Robert Anglen and Jen Fifield.*
Leaks in the metal roof of a state fairgrounds building caused workers to move and protect ballots during a July 23, 2021, thunderstorm as a review of Maricopa County's 2020 election continued. A livestream showed multiple views from inside the building. SCRENSHOT FROM AZAUDIT.ORG

Experts dismissed the 'audit' as worthless. But it also helped the GOP and related interests rake in millions and keep the cause of Donald Trump alive.

Ronald J. Hansen, Yvonne Wingett Sanchez and Jen Fifield, Arizona Republic
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On the day in March that Ken Bennett joined the state Senate’s ballot review team, he wanted a Democrat to join him.

Bennett, the Republican former state Senate president and secretary of state, was well known in conservative circles. But he wanted to add bipartisan credibility to a Republican-led effort cast as a forensic audit of Maricopa County’s election results.

He called his friend, F. Ann Rodriguez, the recently retired Pima County recorder. Rodriguez, a Democrat, oversaw more than 280 elections over 28 years in office.

She laughed.

“Ken, you don’t have enough money to pay me to do that,” she remembered telling him on March 23. “There is a no-win situation in that one. No matter what comes out, we...
know in politics there’s a fall person. You’ll get nothing out of this, Ken. Absolutely nothing.”

That same day, Helen Purcell, the former Republican Maricopa County recorder, told Bennett why she had turned down the job as liaison to the ballot review that he had just taken.

“I just don’t think any good can come of this,” she told him.

Three days later, Bennett contacted the Arizona Democratic Party, whose leaders were roundly skeptical the review would be fair or boost public confidence. They declined to participate.

On March 28, Bennett began reaching out to Pete Rios, the former Democratic state senator from Pinal County, who is a former county supervisor there.

“I need your help,” Rios remembered Bennett saying when they finally spoke on April 1. “You’re the first one I thought of.”

Rios said he needed several days to consider the offer. In truth, he doubted he would do it; only his respect for Bennett kept him from turning it down flat.

After consulting three fellow Democrats, all of whom warned against joining a “fiasco,” Rios told Bennett he couldn’t take the job.

“Ken, my D’s will hang me if there is some question at the end of this audit that says that there was fraud when there really wasn’t,” Rios told Bennett in April.

Bennett had a similar sense.

“The R’s will kill me, too,” Bennett said. “I’m going to do the best I can do to get to the bottom of this and just to try to prove to people that elections in Arizona are safe. When we find that, as I assume we will, Republicans are going to be upset at me. But I’m willing to take that chance.”
Was it about election integrity ... or Trump?

When she agreed to force a review of Maricopa County’s ballots, Arizona Senate President Karen Fann, R-Prescott, was pulled into an operation that brought together President Donald Trump’s network of confidants, fundraisers, media allies and conspiracy theorists.

Fann, a previously low-profile lawmaker known for her pragmatic conservatism, said the effort was all about restoring confidence in elections, highlighting problems and crafting better laws.

But those who paid millions for it wanted the ballot review to be all about overturning President Joe Biden’s victory over Trump, or at least cast doubt on it for conservatives.

The process morphed into an internationally scrutinized spectacle that dragged on for months inside a sports arena once known as the “Madhouse on McDowell.”

Events unfolded on cable news channels and social media like a political Rorschach test.
To some conservatives, the review created a state-level model to explore theories explaining a defeat they couldn’t accept, and a reason for sympathetic donors to raise money for future election battles.

To others, it was a bizarre distraction from reality led by amateurs — a gaffe-prone operation conducted to nurse Trump’s wounded ego and pad the pockets of grifters.

It only took a handful of state lawmakers and a $150,000 contract to get the review going. Five months later, the hand recount found Biden defeated Trump by a slightly larger margin than the official county results.

The contractors who did the work didn’t speak much about the count; they tried to raise other questions.

Far from bolstering public confidence, the often-secretive ballot review deepened suspicions of election fraud among Trump supporters. It laid bare intraparty battles within the GOP and widened the partisan gulf separating Democrats and Republicans.

Election experts across the political spectrum dismissed the process as worthless because it fell well below auditing standards.

But to Fann and many Republicans, the review provided a tangible response to a deluge of complaints over Trump's loss. It also helped the GOP and related interests rake in cash and made Fann a star in conservative circles.

Taxpayers, meanwhile, incurred millions of dollars in extra costs for security, lawyers, and replacing vote-counting machines used in just one federal election cycle.

In a four-month investigation, The Arizona Republic examined a trove of text messages, emails and court records, many made public after suing the state for access. Republic reporters spoke to decision-makers, consultants, staff, contractors, campaign aides and others tied to the review of the presidential and U.S. Senate races in Maricopa County. Some talked on the record about their experiences, while others spoke on the condition they not be identified in order to speak candidly about private conversations.

With Fann presiding, Arizona gave Trump the ballot review he desperately wanted.

Other states such as Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin are now working on variations. If the trend continues into the 2022 cycle, it could mark a triumph of partisan extremism over professional election management.

Fann chooses partisans with little experience with ballot reviews

As a court fight continued in early 2021 over control of Maricopa County’s ballots, Fann was busy building a partisan team to handle a recount should the Senate win.

Fann had talked with Trump and Giuliani after the election. She spoke with retired Army Col. Phil Waldron, a Trump ally who was working with Giuliani and had cast himself as an election-security expert, and Jovan Pulitzer, who claimed to have invented
ballot-inspection technology. She also communicated with Randy Pullen, a certified public accountant who once led the state GOP and had ties to national Republicans.

In January, Fann texted Waldron. She and other lawmakers had met with him when he came with Giuliani after the election to press the Legislature to change Arizona’s electors.

Fann seemed set to hire the Texas company Waldron was working with, Allied Security Operations Group, which already helped lead the analysis used in a failed legal challenge to the election results in a Michigan county.

On Jan. 29, a Senate GOP spokesperson sent her a draft of a news release to announce Allied would be hired “to conduct a forensic audit.” She told the staffer the company couldn’t yet be named, emails showed.

“Please just say we have selected our own independent qualified forensic auditing firm,” Fann wrote back.

On Feb. 5, Fann pivoted to what she called “Plan B” after news reports that Waldron could be involved. She texted Waldron there were efforts afoot to “trash Allied” to “move the focus away from what we are legitimately seeking.”

The same day, she texted Doug Logan, a rural Floridian and CEO of a small cybersecurity firm called Cyber Ninjas. She later told The Republic she found him in a
list of recommended analysts that she got, but she didn’t remember exactly who had suggested him.

The full contents of Fann and Logan’s messages remain undisclosed, but Logan must have made an impression.

In an interview, Fann said she wanted a review that would inspire broad public confidence and stand as a template for others.

“No let’s find one or two good people that absolutely (have) immaculate reputations,” Fann told The Republic on Feb. 12. She said the effort would produce something “we could all trust and know they are going to do a good job and that this would set a standard moving forward. Not just Arizona, but all states. That is what I envisioned we could do.”

By Feb. 27, Fann wondered in a text exchange if Waldron could vouch for Logan and Cyber Ninjas.

“There is no way we can contract with ‘allied’ or ‘Jovan’ although I know allied is fully capable and probably the best in the field,” Fann wrote.

“Yes Ma’am - Doug is very reputable,” Waldron replied.

“Thank you. That makes me feel more comfortable,” Fann texted.

Waldron and Logan had been working for months under Trump allies to try to overturn the election results.

Logan had worked under Allied Security Operations Group in the Antrim County, Michigan, case. And he had worked with lawyer Sidney Powell and stayed at the property of lawyer Lin Wood as Logan tried to convince courts and federal lawmakers of voting fraud, in an effort to block Biden’s presidency.
Fann said she spent “hundreds of hours” interviewing and researching potential contractors.

“I can’t open up the Yellow Pages, and say, you know, here are forensic auditors. They’re just not there,” she said on the nightly PBS public affairs show “Arizona Horizon.”

“Literally, it was, you know, talking to other senators, talking to other states, talking to the Federal Election Commission, talking to everybody,” she said. “And interesting enough, the more I started asking questions, this, that, and the other, I actually had people that started talking to me, calling me, and saying, ‘Hey, have you checked these guys out?’ … It was truly just a lot, of — a lot of conversations that finally led to this.”

Fann noted that one potential contractor’s bid ran into the millions. She had committed $150,000 from the Senate’s budget for the contractor and left the rest of the cost to private donors.

Despite Fann’s stated desire for a review to bolster public confidence in elections, the selection of Cyber Ninjas cemented its partisanship.

As he worked alongside Trump allies, in December Logan had tweeted #stopthesteal, the rallying cry for those claiming a stolen election across the country. He shared a post claiming fraud occurred “and people better get wise fast.” He compared the U.S. election to Venezuela’s and said he was “ashamed how few republicans are talking about it.”

His conspiratorial, partisan bent didn’t disqualify him in Fann’s mind to examine Maricopa County’s ballots.

Meanwhile, she was hearing from scores of people who wanted her to use Pulitzer, who claims he invented a technology that can evaluate whether a ballot is real.
Pulitzer is a former treasure hunter and author of a book titled “How to Cut Off Your Arm and Eat Your Dog.” But he is perhaps best known for developing a cat-shaped barcode reader dubbed one of the biggest technology flops in modern history.

On Jan. 25, he had talked with Fann about his “detection process” while she was researching potential contractors. In an email to her, he wrote, “My only goal is to bring voter confidence to American voters and as such, they do not trust any machines used in the vote.”

By then, he had tried to get Georgia lawmakers to take note of his “kinematic artifact detection” and had become a revered figure in election-conspiracy circles. In an effort to play a role in the ballot review, he urged his fans to email Arizona lawmakers.

It wasn’t helping his case.

“Jovan posting on you tube and Twitter is not helping us with selecting an independent unbiased auditing firm,” Fann texted Waldron in February.

Days later, she added, “He has got to stop these you tubes. Its having a negative affect on the credibility of our audit.”

Later, she asked Waldron for advice on how to deal with Pulitzer and his followers. The text exchanges reveal how Fann relied on Waldron’s familiarity with others whom she later hired.

“I’ve been trying to ignore him but he’s inciting the crowds who are now demanding we use him or no one else. Should I continue to ignore or should I reach out to at least get a proposal?” she texted. “I don’t know how any of us could honestly use him and keep our credibility.”

Waldron reminded her of something he had previously told her while in her office one day: “Jovan’s technology hasn’t been used in a forensic audit of election ballots to-date.”

Pulitzer claimed in a sworn statement to have developed technology that can distinguish whether ballots are fraudulent or not by analyzing paper folds and markings. Those mailed, he said in the affidavit, should contain “kinetic markers” because of their handling and folding. Fraudulent ballots would lack those markers, he has said.
Asked specifically by The Republic to explain his technology, and how it was used in the ballot review, if at all, Pulitzer declined.

On Feb. 26, a Maricopa County Superior Court judge effectively cleared the way for the ballot review to proceed after upholding subpoenas issued by the state Senate to examine the county’s ballots and election system.

The county didn’t appeal the ruling, to the surprise of some. County officials had long said they only wanted a court order to clarify what was permitted by law.

Even so, the county didn’t hand over the ballots for another 55 days as it waited for the Senate to finalize who would run the ballot inspection and where it would take place.

Fann formally announced on March 31 that Cyber Ninjas would oversee the review.

The firm’s contract with the Arizona Senate used soft language and didn’t list clear-cut expectations. There was little holding Cyber Ninjas accountable for producing inaccurate or incomplete results.

**Former GOP chair consults from the shadows**

The review, reliant on Trump partisans, lacked transparency from the beginning. Pullen, the former state GOP chairman, was deeply involved in the effort, but that wasn’t publicly known until weeks into the ballot count.

On March 2, Pullen texted Reince Priebus, Trump’s former chief of staff, that he was “assisting” on the ballot review and asked if Priebus, an attorney, had any conflicts, or knew of any election audit firms.

> “Let me check,” Priebus responded.

> “We get one shot at this audit and it needs to be done right,” Pullen texted back.

After days passed, Pullen texted again a few times, asking for a “good attorney” and a draft audit plan. The texts suggested Pullen sought Priebus to work on the Arizona review.

On March 31, Pullen texted a friend about the selection of Cyber Ninjas: “I researched them and wrote a couple of pages of notes on their proposal that were added to the plan.”

Later, he sent Priebus a link to a nonprofit raising money for the effort. Pullen also solicited funds through Jeff DeWit, a former high-level Trump campaign official and ex-state treasurer.

While Pullen still wasn’t publicly identified with the effort, Fann kept him apprised of some details of the still-evolving review, blind-copying him on emails to Bennett, Logan and others.
Neither Pullen nor Priebus responded to The Republic’s requests for comment.

**Contractors brought limited experience with elections**

The ballot review’s supporting cast of contractors didn’t lack for color but had little experience with election procedures and data.

Logan brought on partisan analysts who had worked for Trump allies.

The person he hired to lead the examination of voting machines had worked for Allied Security, the company Waldron worked with, in the Michigan court case attempting to prove voting machine fraud. Election experts elsewhere had debunked claims the machines were designed to allow for vote switching.

Cyber Ninjas also hired Wake Technology Services Inc., a Pennsylvania-based company that often worked in the health care industry. Sidney Powell’s organization, Defending the Republic, hired Wake in December to do a Republican-ordered ballot review in Fulton County, Pennsylvania.

The America Project, an organization run by Patrick Byrne, the former CEO of Overstock.com, screened the workers for the ballot review. Prospective workers registered on the organization’s website, fundtheaudit.com, and needed to pass background checks and sign nondisclosure agreements.

The organizations led by Byrne and Michael Flynn, a former national security adviser for Trump, paid Cyber Ninjas most of the millions of dollars it collected to run the ballot review.

Before his involvement in the ballot review, Byrne quit his post at Overstock in 2019 after disclosing he had had a romantic relationship with Maria Butina, a Russian spy who went to prison for operating as a covert foreign agent. Federal authorities found she had infiltrated the National Rifle Association and established ties with conservatives on behalf of the Kremlin.

Adding to the conspiracy-minded crowd, Fann, late in the review process, hired Shiva Ayyadurai to review voter signatures on mail-in ballot envelopes.

Ayyadurai, who was once married to actress Fran Drescher, has four degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and claimed to have invented email when he was a high school student.

“Dr. Shiva,” as he is known, also was a two-time failed U.S. Senate candidate in Massachusetts who claimed election officials there had deleted a million ballot images from his 2020 primary loss.
Twitter suspended Ayyadurai’s account in 2020 after he had posted misinformation about the coronavirus, saying it could be treated with vitamin C.

**Spinning ballots, color-coded shirts: Work begins at coliseum**

With Maricopa County’s ballots and voting machines in hand and with contractors in place, Arizona moved ahead amid doubts that the cast Fann had assembled was up to the job.

Cyber Ninjas operated the review from Arizona Veterans Memorial Coliseum, the saddle-shaped arena that once served as the home of the NBA’s Phoenix Suns. The work inside the coliseum began April 23 and, with a brief break for high school graduations, continued at the state fairgrounds until late July.

Bennett said Fann and the Senate’s GOP leaders considered some other buildings at the Arizona State Fairgrounds.

“Until almost like an afterthought a person on Doug’s staff said, ‘Let’s just look at the coliseum, just for giggles,’” Bennett recalled.

They fell in love with it.
It provided a spacious floor area that would provide light and ample room for cameras and other equipment, Bennett said. The building is lightly used in the spring, which seemed to be enough time to review the 2.1 million ballots.

The county sent over 46 shrink-wrapped pallets holding 1,692 boxes of ballots and other election material. They were placed in cages made of chain-link fencing.

The night before the recount began, Logan and Bennett appeared at a news conference.

Logan wanted to talk about the unique process his team had created for reviewing ballots. Journalists wanted to talk about who was paying him. It made for a tense gathering; few understood how the review would work and who was really behind it.

Already, though, Trump’s team knew its importance. That night, standing inside the coliseum, Logan received a call from Giuliani.

“A member of the media said they had Rudy Giuliani on the phone and asked Mr. Logan if he wanted to say hello,” said Rod Thomson, a spokesman for Cyber Ninjas. “Of course, he was courteous and respectful to such an important person in American history and took the phone.”

Thomson didn’t say who the media member was. But one TV personality with a connection to Giuliani was there. One America News correspondent Christina Bobb worked with Giuliani on election fraud allegations in the early days after the election, and she co-founded one of the nonprofits that funded the ballot review.

From the start, the ballot-inspection process was haphazard.

Volunteers showed up to the coliseum the first day to wait in an hourlong line, their cars stretching out to McDowell Road. Google shut down the sign-up sheet the night before, and leaders of the review scrambled to find the list of people approved to observe the process.

Before the counting began, Logan showed observers — including Arizona Republic reporter Jen Fifield — the setup on the arena floor.

Fifield pointed out to Logan that the ballot counters had blue pens to make tally marks for each vote they counted on a ballot. Election officials only permit using red ink during ballot-counting because that is the one color the machines cannot read.
If an auditor used any color other than red, it could change the appearance of voters' selections.

Logan said he thought only black pens could be used on ballots. He walked away to check, and later replaced the blue pens with green ones.

That day, workers labored to get everything up and running. The sheets the workers used to track ballots posed a problem. The computer program used to track ballots and vote counts for each box of ballots was set up to read numbers up to three digits long, but some boxes had more than 1,000 ballots. At one point, a manager at one table thought the volunteers were counting test ballots. They were real.

The day after the ballot inspections began, the project captured the attention of those gathered 2,000 miles away for a fundraiser at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach, Florida.

Among the speakers was Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Ariz., a staunch Trump supporter who claimed fraud in the presidential election and was singled out as instrumental to the “Stop the Steal” effort by one of its organizers.

Biggs, who chairs the conservative House Freedom Caucus, invoked the Arizona Senate’s efforts while addressing a crowd of donors at a $10,000-per-couple “VIP host” event.

As days passed, the coliseum became a quiet hive of monotony. Activities were livestreamed, but there was little information about what was actually happening.

Logan usually remained holed up in the concourse, out of sight from the gathered media. Bennett often walked from the concourse into the arena, inspecting the operation.

The volunteers, many of whom came from law enforcement and conservative groups, spread out in color-coded shirts across the coliseum floor at dozens of circular tables with devices to hold a ballot that spun around for quick inspection.
Three people at each table reviewed the presidential and Senate selections for each ballot and recorded the selections as they saw them. There were workers to place each ballot on the spinner and to remove them. The routine took seconds to move from one ballot to another, to another.

Other workers toiled at a row of rectangular tables set up with cameras hanging above metal frames. One person loaded ballots onto the table, snapped an image of one side of a ballot, turned it over and snapped the other side while another worker viewed the pictures on computer screens next to them.

The data and images were periodically uploaded to a refrigerator-sized black server in the center of the floor, cordoned off with belt barriers. Dozens of white security cameras hung 10 feet overhead from tubular aluminum poles scattered across the arena floor.

Liz Howard served two five-day stints as an observer with the Secretary of State’s Office. She got to the coliseum the week after the recount began and saw the spinning ballots in person. It seemed a strange and unorganized process to her.

Howard, senior counsel at the nonpartisan Brennan Center for Justice, said she believes the ballots spun far too quickly to get a good look at two different races. Arizona Republic observers noted it sometimes only took five seconds for a ballot to be placed on the turntable and whiz past three workers.

“It’s reminiscent of Lucy and Ethel and the chocolate factory,” Howard said, referring to the famous “I Love Lucy” episode where the women are overwhelmed by the pace of a conveyor belt for candy.

It wasn’t perfect: Ultraviolet light, spilled ballots, foraging for bamboo

None of the contractors at the coliseum had experience running elections, or conducting election reviews before 2020. Most weren’t from Maricopa County.

That’s why Carol Parsons came in handy.

Parsons, a Republican who lives in Chandler, worked for weeks inside the coliseum, first as a ballot inspector and then in management. Organizers promoted her once they realized she knew what she was doing, she said.

Parsons has often worked temporary jobs in the Maricopa County Elections Department.

She said it was clear Cyber Ninjas didn’t understand election protocols.

One example: As a “ballot inspector,” she and other workers were told initially to wave ultraviolet lights over the ballots to look for glowing splatter marks.

As the public wondered what the workers were doing, John Brakey, an elections activist who was serving as an adviser to the ballot review, said in a TV interview that the workers were searching for bamboo — following a conspiracy theory that illegal ballots had been cast from South Korea.
But the yellow marks they were looking for, called printer stenography, were remnants of the printing process and were not viewed as significant.

The contractors stopped using the UV lights within weeks.

“They had no idea what they were looking for,” Parsons said.

Logan frequently asked her questions about the county’s elections, she said, including how the county stored and tracked ballots.

Parsons said it seemed to her that Logan looked disappointed when she offered benign explanations for the questions he raised.

Logan responded in a statement from his spokesperson saying that The Republic writes "what you have predetermined to write, regardless of what we say."

"Our comments, no matter how fact-based, don’t change the story that is often based on only comments from someone else,” the statement said. “Most of what you are going to write on this is inaccurate. But regardless of what we say, you will run it anyway. Because that has been the case all along."

Meanwhile, images from the coliseum floor indicated the ballot review was more partisan and less precise than Logan and his supporters were letting on.

Early on, former state Rep. Anthony Kern, R-Glendale, a Trump elector whose name appeared on all Arizona ballots, inspected the ballots for days. He remained in that role.
until Republic reporter Ryan Randazzo tweeted about the apparent conflict of interest. Bennett acknowledged at the time Kern’s presence "wasn't the best optics."

At another point, Bennett and other workers went through ballots reserved for military personnel and citizens abroad. As they placed the ballots on a scale to weigh them, the ballots spilled onto the floor.

Bennett maintained the ballots were carefully placed back in their box. But observers from the Arizona Secretary of State’s Office said Bennett and the workers failed to count the number of ballots to ensure all of them were replaced.

“Observers noticed that the contractors treated these ballots with less care, and overheard comments made by the contractors indicating that they believed these were not legitimate nor official ballots,” Secretary of State Katie Hobbs, a Democrat, wrote in a report ahead of the review’s findings.

In the tallying process, Hobbs noted that the three counters examining the same ballots did not all have to agree on the candidate choices for each ballot.

“This process failure is fatal to the entire endeavor and no count resulting from this process should be relied upon for any purpose, other than as an example of procedures that should not be used,” she wrote.

Logan’s absence on the floor was part of the problem, Parsons said. For a short time, Parsons worked as a human relations manager, sitting next to Logan in the manager’s cubes in the breakroom area that had been set up in the coliseum out of public view.

Logan worked long hours at his desk, Parsons said, huddled over his laptop wearing headphones.

Logan rarely ventured on the arena floor, where volunteers reviewed the ballots. When he was, he breezed by, easily recognizable with his center-parted hair, leading tours of out-of-state lawmakers or political candidates, unlocking ballot cages or giving brief direction to the managers on the floor.
Logan, often in a button-down shirt and khaki pants, stood out on the floor from the workers in their primary-colored T-shirts.

Logan spoke softly to the managers he led and offered handshakes to workers in the halls — even the observers with the Secretary of State’s Office.

Parsons said when organizers added a third shift of workers, Logan told her not to tell the Secretary of State’s Office when it would happen. He didn’t want to start something new and have the office’s observers there to see it, she said.

“To me, it was kind of suspicious,” Parsons said.

She said Logan sometimes acknowledged weaknesses in his system on the spot. When a Secretary of State observer pointed out that the trucks transporting ballots during one of the moves did not have locks, Logan suggested they add them, the observer noted in a final report.

But often such issues didn’t make it to Logan, Parsons said. When they did, she said, Logan frequently left others to decide, and, in some cases, no one made a decision at all.

Managers determined one worker took tally sheets and a flash drive with data home with him. They recommended Logan fire him.

The worker remained on the job, Parsons said.

Logan’s indecisiveness left the two contractors running the day-to-day operations, Wake TSI and Scottsdale-based StratTech Solutions, fighting for power, according to many accounts.

Ryan Macias, an observer for the Secretary of State’s Office, said there were obvious conflict and communication problems between Wake and StratTech. Managers and others approached him on the coliseum floor to confide their frustrations.

Meanwhile, Bennett was beginning to annoy insiders such as Waldron, who had agreed to take a back-seat role but remained involved behind the scenes.

Waldron, in a since-deleted video posted online by Prescott conservative activist Lyle Rapacki, criticized Bennett for overstepping his liaison role and creating “operational problems.”

“I’ve seen quite a bit of misinformation coming from the liaison officer probably because he is not operationally involved and shouldn’t be putting out information,” Waldron said. “Shouldn’t be talking about things he doesn’t know about.”

Waldron emphasized that Cyber Ninjas would make the decisions for running the ballot review — not Bennett or the Senate.

**Power struggle leads to resignations, firings**

The recount dragged on far longer than expected.

Logan had predicted the work would be done in 14 days and volunteers would be out of the coliseum by the time they needed to pack up for the scheduled high school
graduations. They were not even close to halfway done when the Senate’s lease ended May 14.

When they came back from a break more than a week later, the power structure had been upended.

Pullen’s involvement became publicly known for the first time. Journalists were told Pullen was the new spokesperson.

Inside the coliseum, Macias realized something had changed the minute he walked in the door.

The people working the sign-in tables, and managing the tables, were different.

Wake TSI was gone.

In the media, Pullen downplayed the changes. StratTech took over; the transition would be seamless, he said.

But inside the coliseum, Parsons said, it was a mismanaged mess. Partisanship and special treatment she saw convinced her the review could not be fair.
Parsons ultimately was fired by audit organizers. She provided a security list to The Republic showing people who had access to the ballot review. It included local conservatives such as Jim Lamon, a Republican candidate for U.S. Senate who helped pay for audit security; Thomas Lane, who was the director of Donald Trump’s campaign operations in Arizona on Election Day; and audit activists Shelby Busch and Steve Robinson.

Austin Steinbart, a leader in the QAnon movement sometimes known as “Baby Q,” appeared on the security list as an employee of Cyber Ninjas.

He spent 225 days in prison for trying to extort a file-sharing company. He was released in April and joined the ballot review not long afterward.

*Includes information from Arizona Republic reporters Ryan Randazzo and Robert Anglen.*
It remains to be seen how long baseless concerns about vote counts will continue to undermine the election process.

Ronald J. Hansen and Yvonne Wingett Sanchez, Arizona Republic
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Reporters from international news outlets flew in to Phoenix to watch from a makeshift press box as volunteers unpacked, inspected and repacked boxes of Maricopa County’s ballots inside Veterans Memorial Coliseum.

They weren’t the only outsiders transfixed by the recount of 2.1 million ballots ordered by Republicans in the Arizona Senate.

GOP lawmakers from at least 18 states trekked to the desert during triple-digit heat to study the process, pose for pictures, battle members of the mainstream press and help push former President Donald Trump’s baseless concern for a stolen election.

“I like this approach in Arizona because it is scientific,” said Pennsylvania state Sen. Doug Mastriano, a Republican, after he visited the coliseum in June.

Arizona’s unprecedented undertaking was a curiosity to many, but notably less so to one group: Arizona’s state senators.
The election review, started almost singlehandedly by Senate President Karen Fann at the behest of Trump, his allies and some members of her own caucus, was barely discussed at private GOP Senate meetings during the 2021 legislative session.

Even as the review drew elected officials from around the country, briefings for GOP senators focused on legislation and other matters.

One GOP senator who supported a ballot review and a legislative hearing after the 2020 election said Fann wasn’t “having any caucus meetings or anything about it. It’s just kind of out there.”

Ken Bennett, whose job as liaison was to update the Senate, said Fann, R-Prescott, rarely asked him for briefings, and almost no one else ever did.

“Had she invited me to a caucus meeting and explain things, I would have,” he said. “But that never happened.”

In a four-month investigation, The Arizona Republic dug into the election review by examining text messages, emails, public records and court records, many made public after the news outlet sued the state for access.

Republic reporters spoke to decision-makers, consultants, staff, contractors, campaign aides and others tied to the review of the presidential and U.S. Senate races in Maricopa County. Some talked on the record about their experiences, while others spoke on the condition they not be identified in order to speak candidly about private conversations.

Few people were needed to trigger the ballot review, and the idea quickly found support among those eager to believe Trump had won Arizona.

Outside the Senate, strident social-media messaging, aggressive fundraising and friendly coverage by conservative media outlets created an echo chamber supporting the ballot review. It left their audience with the impression the effort would reveal the fraud Trump insisted happened.

The ballot review received plenty of other media coverage as well, providing powerful motivation for donors in both corners of American politics.

To many conservatives, Arizona’s political theater served as a welcome distraction from the aftermath of the election, the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol by Trump’s followers, and from the early days of President Joe Biden’s administration.

The review helped stoke imagined grievances over 2020 and offered a key test for Republicans wanting Trump’s blessings moving forward.

From the outset, it appeared more about political messaging than any serious recount. And at the end, the contractors merely raised questions, made no allegations of fraud and didn't challenge the final outcome.

It had little connection to transparency or ensuring broad public confidence in elections.
Champions for the ballot review

One America News, the far-right network favored by Trump, especially after Fox News called Arizona for Biden early on election night, wound up with wide-ranging access to the activities in the arena and to the officials overseeing the review.

“It was only done because they were willing to ... make the (video) feed available to everybody free,” Bennett said, relating what he was told. “If anyone else would have offered to do that first, whether it was CNN or azcentral or anybody else, it could have easily been them.”

But OAN stood apart from other news organizations for other reasons.

Christina Bobb, one of OAN’s broadcast personalities, organized speakers who complained about voting issues in a meeting headed by Rudy Giuliani, Trump’s lawyer, on Nov. 30 in Phoenix. She also worked to reverse the election results in Arizona.
Email records show Bobb, a lawyer, provided documents to Fann on behalf of Giuliani in December, when Fann was considering what to do about reviewing election results.

She also was part of a fundraising effort to help underwrite the ballot review. Bobb urged her OAN viewers to donate to Voices and Votes, an organization she heads, to help pay for the ballot review in Arizona and elsewhere.

Other news organizations, including The Arizona Republic, had to bring in lawyers to negotiate access to the proceedings in the coliseum. Doug Logan, the CEO of Cyber Ninjas, the Florida company that oversaw the review, sought in April to require reporters to commit to working 30 hours as volunteers on the review to gain access, without allowing them to record the proceedings.

Rod Thomson, Logan’s friend and spokesman, advised Logan and others at the time that such restrictions would be “spun against us as setting up unreasonable barriers to media being observers. We say we want them, but we really don’t, type of thing.”

Bobb, meanwhile, had unrivaled access.

The ballot review had other reliable cheerleaders.

The Gateway Pundit, a right-wing website with a long history of trafficking in fabricated news, covered the review with characteristic attacks on other media outlets and stories that were untrue.

There were Twitter accounts linked to the ballot review that attacked reporters and, in a low moment, mocked the death of a political activist’s dog.

Those who wrote and shaped some of the caustic tweets were affiliated with The America Project, the organization run by Patrick Byrne, the former CEO of Overstock.com.

One of the people who helped coordinate tweets is Patrick Weaver, a man whose online biography said he worked in Trump’s Department of Homeland Security.

Another was former state lawmaker Steve Montenegro, a Republican whose political career imploded in 2018 after the disclosure of his racy text correspondence with a female junior legislative staffer, who also sent him a topless photo.

At the time, Montenegro dismissed the matter that stood in contrast to his standing as a married Christian minister as “false tabloid trash.” As part of the ballot review, Montenegro weaponized Twitter and viewed reporters as the enemy.

“Media is feeling the heat,” Montenegro said in a May 2 text to Randy Pullen, the co-liaison to the ballot review who was a former chairman of the Arizona Republican Party and former treasurer of the Republican National Committee. “Seeing how effective the Twitter account is defending the audit and messaging. Also fundraising.”

The spectacle galvanized fundraising in a non-election year, although it’s still unclear how much money private organizations claiming to support the Arizona ballot review raised in 2021.

But the review was a boon for the state’s political parties.
Still more counts and some surprising leaks

Despite the efforts to present the ballot review as necessary and credible, word of mistakes seeped out, and those with election auditing experience took note.

By late June, Cyber Ninjas’ workers had made their way through a recount of the votes on 2.1 million ballots. Then they started to reopen boxes and recount ballots, comparing them with the numbers the county gave them.

As the Senate’s extended lease in the coliseum ended, the process was not over.

The state fair board allowed the work to continue in a large exhibit hall on the property without air conditioning — one that was not meant to be occupied in the desert summer.

Conditions inside the building were oppressive. Even with swamp coolers running, Ken Matta, an observer with the Secretary of State’s Office, said he recorded an average temperature of 87 degrees with an average humidity of 59%.

Election auditing experts watching the process included Larry Moore, the retired founder of Massachusetts-based Clear Ballot Group, an elections-technology company used in nine states, including Florida and New York.

Moore, who viewed Cyber Ninjas as unqualified, monitored the ballot review from afar.
Working with Benny White, a Pima County Republican who had run for recorder there, and Tim Halvorsen, the retired chief technology officer at Clear Ballot, Moore offered an audacious challenge to test Cyber Ninjas’ accuracy.

They said they could break down the candidate-by-candidate vote totals in any box Cyber Ninjas picked without even looking inside it.

Maricopa County reports ballots by precincts, not by the box they were packed inside. Moore’s team reverse-engineered a tally for each box. It offered an instant, relatively granular check on disparities from the certified results.

Fann ignored Moore’s offer, but Bennett found it tantalizing.

Bennett had long been denied information about the hand count tally.

On July 12, Moore and White “sent to the Senate a very detailed reconciliation of how many ballots they thought were in each box,” Bennett said. “And it intrigued me greatly whether the count we were coming up with was anywhere close to that count.”

The next day, Fann said Cyber Ninjas’ hand count totals were different from the county’s, and she ordered a box-by-box machine count of the ballots. It would be overseen by Pullen, a former national GOP operative whom Fann and others consulted about the review long before he was publicly identified with it in May. This count would tally how many ballots were in each box but not try to determine who got how many votes.

Bennett asked Pullen to describe how the new count would be independent of the company’s count, but Pullen didn’t.

So Bennett took matters into his own hands.

“I’ve already assumed in my mind that the only reason you would do a third count is if the first two counts didn’t match,” Bennett said.

He managed to get 24 box totals from the hand count from some of the workers. And even though the Senate and Cyber Ninjas had prohibited anyone involved in the ballot count from giving out results before the final tallies were ready, Bennett reached out to Moore and White.

“I got on a Zoom call with Larry and his two guys, and we discussed that some of them matched and some of them didn’t,” Bennett remembered.

Moore said in that 24-box sample, the Senate’s machine counts nearly exactly matched his group’s figures that replicated the county’s final canvass. Such a result made clear Cyber Ninjas’ hand recount could be checked.

After news got out that Bennett was sharing data, he was treated like a pariah.

On July 23, Bennett drove from his home in Prescott to the fairgrounds. When he got there, he said, a volunteer told him Pullen had suspended him indefinitely.

“I returned to Prescott and started thinking through what had transpired,” Bennett recalled. “I eventually concluded that if I was going to be excluded from the rest of the
audit, and I was no longer the liaison, I eventually came to the position that I would resign.”

Bennett called Fann, but she didn’t answer. The next morning, he was about to announce his move in a radio interview when Fann called him.

“Please don’t resign. Stay on as liaison,” she said, Bennett recalled.

“Karen,” he said, “I have to have access to the data, to the workspaces and to the procedures.”

“She says, ‘We’ll work something out over the next day or two,’ and based on that commitment, I switched on the fly.”

It took three days to hammer out a mutual statement they agreed upon.

Privately, Fann wasn’t happy with Bennett.

In a July 28 text to someone identified in her phone as “Leila,” Fann indicated her frustration with Bennett.

“He’s (mad) because he wants access to all the data now and I told him no,” Fann said. “The audit is not complete and we shouldn’t be interfering with their job. The guy can’t help himself with wanting to be the center of attention.”

As details about Bennett’s situation trickled out, something else was leaking as well: the roof of the exhibit hall.

Matta showed up on July 23 a few hours after Bennett had headed back to Prescott.

It was pouring outside.

Matta noticed a bucket inside the building. And then another. And then another.

“That was the first clue the roof was leaking,” he said.

He saw water dripping from air ducts in the ceiling.

Ballots are normally kept sealed in a vault for 24 months after an election in case of any election challenges that might come under state law. The county’s ballot tabulation machines, worth millions, were in the rain-sodden building.

Matta examined the pallets of boxes, stacked in rows along the side of the room. On one pallet, he saw a pool of water sitting atop the sealed boxes.

When Matta pointed it out, the workers treated it as if it was no big deal. They covered the boxes in plastic and started to move the pallets to drier spots. Pullen said that day that no ballots or machines were damaged.

But Matta said their reaction demonstrated an overall lack of care throughout the process. “That’s what makes me the maddest,” he said. “Those are our ballots.”
Trump returns to Arizona, doling out special praise

Trump returned to Arizona on July 24 for the first time since losing his reelection bid. The ballot review, and what the former president would say about it, loomed over the rally.

Turning Point Action, a Trump-friendly organization based in Phoenix, hosted the event, which gave the nearly 5,000 conservatives packed in the Arizona Federal Theatre a chance to hear from many of the Republicans seeking their votes next year.

From the outset of his rambling remarks that lasted nearly two hours, Trump name-checked nine Republican state senators whom he thanked for pushing the ballot review. One by one, the senators basked in the applause.

“We’re gathered here in Phoenix to show our support for election integrity and for the brave and unyielding conservative warriors in the Arizona state Senate,” Trump said.
“You’ve created a movement all over the country. This is now starting all over the country.

“Today, I want to send our profound and everlasting gratitude to every Arizona Republican who had the fortitude and the backbone to defy the lying media.”

Trump singled out Fann for special praise. “She’s been brave, she’s been strong,” he said.

“I predict when the votes come in,” Trump continued, “I think they’re going to be so horrible that she’s going to go three steps further than she ever thought she’d have to.”

Trump also pressured Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich, who didn’t attend the rally.

“Hopefully, he’s going to do what everybody knows has to be done,” Trump said of Brnovich, who is running for the U.S. Senate in a Republican primary where Trump’s endorsement could be decisive.

Two other candidates that day helped remind conservatives of Trump’s enduring primacy in GOP politics and the ballot review’s related importance.

Gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake, an enthusiastic Trump supporter and former anchor for Fox 10 KSAZ-TV, received a thunderous ovation that impressed the former president. Two months later, Trump endorsed her and noted her commitment to what he cast as election integrity.

State Sen. Michelle Ugenti-Rita, R-Scottsdale, a candidate for secretary of state who spent years building a political brand tied to measures that make voting harder, felt the sting from the crowd. She had criticized how the ballot review was carried out and was booed off the stage.

The final act: ‘We do have some work to do here’

Workers at the state fairgrounds loaded the nearly 2.1 million ballots onto trucks and returned them to the county July 29, marking the close of a more than three-month process of reviewing ballots and other election equipment.

The review offered few signs that it had changed minds about the 2020 election and the way future ones will be conducted in a deeply divided state.

On Sept. 24, Fann convened a final hearing. It held little suspense after the top-line results had leaked the day before.

The team led by Cyber Ninjas found Biden had won by a net 360 more votes than reported in the 2020 certified results.

Fann spent little time during the nationally watched proceeding going over that finding. Nor did she press Logan to reconcile his specific differences from the certified results.
Fann, however, gave Logan and others hours to raise doubts about the county’s election procedures, from verifying signatures on ballot envelopes to the security of its tabulation systems to reconsidering the scale of mail-in voting altogether.

They pointed to the lack of access to the county’s routers as a critical piece of missing evidence.

But after months of intimating widespread fraud, and allowing Trump and his voters to cling to it as well, Cyber Ninjas’ 115-page report never claimed any. A movement that started in November claiming vote-switching by machines favoring Democrats and widespread votes from dead and illegal voters settled well short of those false allegations.

The report identified thousands of ballots it considered problematic, mainly from people who had moved. It suggested a plurality of those involved registered Democrats but couldn’t offer a breakdown of how those votes would have affected the final tally for the candidates.

That conclusion seemingly mattered little to those who had been the strongest advocates for the review.
In a series of statements throughout the day the report was released, Trump said the review had unearthed “incomprehensible Fraud at an Election Changing level.” He called for Arizona to decertify its election results and used Arizona’s exercise as a model for others to follow.

Several hundred supporters of the ballot review showed up at a rally outside the state Capitol, some carrying signs saying their votes were stolen. They said they still thought Trump had won.

At least two men wore camouflage fatigues carrying firearms. One had a shoulder patch for the Three Percenters, an anti-government paramilitary group.


“We don’t know because as the audit demonstrates very clearly, Mr. Raskin, there are a lot of issues with this election that took place,” Biggs testily replied.
Election analysts react: 'We knew they made the numbers up'

While Cyber Ninjas reported results similar to the county's, many questioned the numbers. A review of the underlying data by one group of election analysts found the company had fudged its numbers by thousands of ballots. They concluded the numbers the Cyber Ninjas reported to the Senate could not be verified or replicated.

Moore and White, who were with the group checking Cyber Ninjas’ work, estimated the company incorrectly tallied about 312,000 ballots and double-counted about 23,000 others.

They based their analysis on the Senate’s own machine count of ballots overseen by Pullen, which nearly matched the county’s certified results. Moore and White called the Cyber Ninjas' numbers “fiction” and a “hoax.”

“We knew they made the numbers up because the discrepancy was so large between the Senate’s machine count and the Ninjas’ hand count,” Moore said. “The vote counts (for each candidate) could not be accurate.”

In November, Moore and White's group, known as The Audit Guys, published a final review of the Cyber Ninjas' hand count data.

Their analysis was based on the nearly 80,000 images of tally sheets that reflected Cyber Ninjas' tallies for every vote, which the Senate made public after demands by The Republic.

“We have tried dozens of ways to include and exclude various boxes and batches to arrive at those precise figures and have been unable to replicate their announced results,” The Audit Guys report said.

Moore said the Cyber Ninjas' claim that Biden gained 99 votes and Trump lost 261 votes in the recount was political theater designed to give the hand count undeserved credibility.

Fight for transparency plays out as review drags on

The proceedings at the fairgrounds were livestreamed, but video shots of a distant work floor didn't provide full transparency. Much about how the election review was conducted remains secret.

The Republic sued the Senate and Cyber Ninjas in June for records such as emails, texts and other communications related to the ballot review. The news organization first requested the documents from the Senate and Cyber Ninjas through the Arizona Public Records Law but was rebuffed.

A left-leaning political nonprofit made a related public records request.
The Republic argued, and a trial court judge agreed, that documents related to the election review are public records because it was conducted under the direction of the Senate, a public body.

Cyber Ninjas, which was performing a core governmental function funded in part by state taxpayer dollars, was required to maintain public records related to the work and make them available to the public, the judge ruled.

Attorneys for the Senate and Cyber Ninjas have appealed multiple judges’ decisions, and many documents remain inaccessible to the public because of claims of legislative privilege.

The fight for those public records continues in the Arizona courts.
'Suspicions are raised and questions are asked without answers'

Benjamin Ginsberg, a Washington, D.C., lawyer who represented the George W. Bush and Mitt Romney presidential campaigns, said Cyber Ninjas had produced "no credible evidence" of widespread fraud.

“To me, the legacy of it is, even with the playing field tilted, they still couldn’t come up with anything,” he said.

Barry Burden, a political-science professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, who researches election administration and public opinion, said Arizona’s ballot review doesn’t appear to have accomplished its stated goals.

“The purported reason for doing these reviews is to boost public confidence, especially among people who voted for Donald Trump and have some skepticism about the election results,” he said.

“But instead, it’s review after review where suspicions are raised and questions are asked without answers, and it looks like for all the millions of dollars and months that were put into Arizona in Maricopa County, it’s only going to foster additional reviews and projects.”

A recent national poll found nearly one-third of Americans believe Biden won in 2020 only due to fraud, a unfounded but bleak view held by 73% of Republicans.

“The increase of distrust in the American system appears to be linked to the persistence of ‘the big lie,’” said Patrick Murray, director of the independent Monmouth University Polling Institute, in a statement with the poll. “The fact that this belief continues to get oxygen is having a serious, and potentially dangerous, impact on faith in our fundamental democratic processes.”

For her part, Fann still hasn’t let go of 2020.

Fann sent Brnovich, Arizona’s top prosecutor, a letter noting the state needed to better verify signatures and maintain voter rolls. She gave him the Cyber Ninjas’ report to consider any additional investigation, putting the onus for any further fallout squarely on him. In November, his office questioned Adrian Fontes, the former Maricopa County recorder, as part of a probe about the election.

The Senate’s activities cost state taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars. County taxpayers, meanwhile, will spend about $2.8 million to replace election equipment used in only one federal election cycle and rendered insecure due to the ballot review.

From the president’s seat in the Senate chamber, Fann indicated election-related legislation would be introduced in the legislative session that begins in January.

“We do have some work to do here,” she said at the close of the three-hour hearing.
“At the very least, what I think can come out of this is that we need to do audits to some extent. We need to do bigger audits on every election just to make sure that everybody is following the rules.”

Fallout: A resignation, a primary challenge, a party divided

It’s unclear how long Trump’s loss, and the split between those who acknowledge it and those who don’t, will divide Arizona Republicans. It remains to be seen how long baseless concerns about vote counts will continue to undermine the election process.

While the ballot review boosted the political and financial fortunes of some Arizona politicians, others gained unwanted scrutiny.

Maricopa County Supervisor Steve Chucri’s political fortunes collapsed.

The Republican had easily won reelection to the county Board of Supervisors in 2020 and was thought to be eying a possible congressional run.
Board Chairman Jack Sellers passed him over for the county board’s vice chair position, going instead with Supervisor Bill Gates.

Sellers cited concerns about Chucri’s time constraints — while in office, Chucri also headed the Arizona Restaurant Association, an influential group that represents the industry.

Chucri, who had met with Giuliani after the election, suspected a different reason.

He was the lone vote on the board late in December against suing the Senate to try to block its subpoenas. As the majority-Republican board tried to present a united voice against a partisan process, Chucri spoke about his differences bluntly in private conversations.

“That one vote, right, cost me from being the vice chair — which, I don’t give a s---,” he said in a conversation secretly recorded by leaders from We the People AZ Alliance.

That group helped lead the efforts to garner support among state and local leaders for the ballot review and unsuccessfully tried to recall the supervisors.

In September, Gateway Pundit published snippets of Chucri’s profanity-laced conversations with the leaders days before the ballot review findings were made public.

In the audio, Chucri perpetuated the unfounded claims that dead people had voted. He indicated there was “multifaceted” fraud that remains without evidence.

He said Sellers and Gates, who both won narrow races, feared a ballot review: “What would happen in those two races?” Chucri said with a conspiratorial tone.

After the audio went viral, Chucri offered his “heartfelt apologies.”

“The comments I made were during a very turbulent time,” he said in a written statement. “There was no cover-up, the election was not stolen. Biden won.”

He resigned from office Nov. 5.

The other county supervisors — Jack Sellers, Bill Gates, Clint Hickman and Steve Gallardo — have gained a measure of vindication.

Glendale Republican state Sen. Paul Boyer, who opposed holding the county board in contempt in the only vote on the ballot review, faces a primary challenge. It comes from Anthony Kern, the former state representative who was outside the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 and was among those inspecting ballots at the coliseum.


DAVID WALLACE AND MICHAEL CHOW/THE REPUBLIC
Boyer should pay for his disloyalty, Trump instructed his followers. In a statement in July, Trump said, “Boyer has been nothing but trouble” while Kern is “a strong and highly respected challenger.”

Stephen Richer, the Republican Maricopa County recorder who defeated Fontes, a Democrat, largely backed the county’s election procedures used by the man he beat.

He criticized Trump’s allies for the ballot review and tried to marshal wider resistance to it, even urging two top aides to Ducey to sign on to a letter decrying it after Trump had heaped praise on the Senate for launching it. That effort flopped.

In text messages and emails to his peers, Richer voiced contempt for conspiracy theorists.

“These people don’t matter to me. As you rightly noted, this is religious. And El Presidente is the lord and savior.

“I had somebody flat tell me that I was an idiot for believing that the machines weren’t connected to the internet, and that she KNOWS they were. How am I supposed to deal with that?”

It’s unclear how long Richer and other county supervisors will endure a backlash from the Republican Party’s Trump loyalists.

State Rep. Mark Finchem, R-Oro Valley, now a candidate in the secretary of state race, also was in Washington, D.C., Jan. 6 for the “Stop the Steal” rally and had been in direct communication with organizers during that period.

He helped spread Trump’s discredited claims of election fraud from its earliest days and pressed repeatedly for a legislative hearing on irregularities cited by Giuliani.

With the ballot review in Maricopa County complete, Finchem called for expanded action. “We need to Audit Pima County,” he wrote on Twitter. He baselessly claimed 35,000 votes were “in question from multiple sources & I want answers.”

Trump rewarded Finchem’s loyalty with his coveted endorsement in a race that had scarcely started.

“Mark was willing to say what few others had the courage to say,” Trump said in his announcement.

In October, Finchem, a man once mocked for his Western apparel, appeared onstage at a Trump rally in Iowa wearing a cowboy hat.
The ballot review also elevated the stature of state Sen. Wendy Rogers, a Republican from Flagstaff and retired Air Force pilot who has lost four runs for Congress.

She was one of the ballot review’s most outspoken supporters and traveled around the country to crusade for similar exercises. In emails to supporters, she demanded a “perp walk” for those responsible and pleaded for cash.

“The only way we will get the word out about the Audit, and the truth of it, is to get it out ourselves — and that takes money,” one said. Later, she issued a letter saying “all 50 states need to be forensically audited” with dozens of lawmakers from all over the nation, from Idaho to Indiana, and Michigan to Mississippi.

The Arizona Republican Party under Chair Kelli Ward leveraged the ballot review to raise funds for itself.

Some Republicans complained the money raised under the banner of the review never actually helped pay for it. Through September, the Arizona GOP pulled in $2.2 million, according to its latest federal fundraising report. By comparison, in the same period two years earlier, the party had collected less than $877,000.

No groups are known to have hit the jackpot better than the Trump-affiliated political-action committees Save America and Make America Great Again. Together, they raised more than $92 million in the first half of the year.

Republicans weren’t alone in cashing in on the ballot review.

The Arizona Democratic Party, under the helm of state Sen. Raquel Terán of Phoenix, battered Republicans for pursuing the review and hit up Democrats for money, too. The party reported raising nearly $2 million in federal funds through September. At the same point in 2019, the Democrats raised $1.3 million.
Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs, a Democrat running for governor in 2022, became a fixture on national news. She condemned the ballot review from start to finish. She and her staff faced death threats over it.

And her campaign hauled in money. The financial fortunes of individual candidates in Arizona won’t be publicly known until financial reports are due in January.

Biggs, U.S. Rep. Paul Gosar and other Republicans involved in the “Stop the Steal” rallies remain under scrutiny by the special House committee examining the Jan. 6 riot.

Bennett seems to be wandering in a political no-man’s land. He is viewed warily by the review’s most ardent supporters and viewed as an accomplice to fraud by those who opposed it.

His political future — if there is one — is unclear.

“I didn’t do this for a political future,” the Prescott Republican said with a laugh. “And I’m not trying to roll it into one.”

Two months later, he confirmed he is considering running for office in 2022.

“I have contemplated the secretary of state position ... and the state Senate seat up here,” he said. “Those have come into my mind. It seems like in today's political climate, being a candidate almost contaminates, if that’s the right word, everything you do.”

Another year, another session

In January, Fann and House Speaker Rusty Bowers, R-Mesa, will open another legislative session as the leaders of their respective chambers.

Bowers, who resisted being pulled into a partisan ballot review, survived a recall effort after several rounds of protests outside his home.

He largely tuned out the review and said he is focused on the upcoming legislative session in a House of Representatives that is expected to have 10 new members.

Fann remains part of the changing political landscape. She announced in early November she will retire from the state Senate after next year.

She will leave transformed. Once a lawmaker unfamiliar to most Arizonans, she’s become a political hero to Trump supporters, recognized even while shopping in California.

“Now,” a friend of hers said, “everywhere she goes, she gets a standing ovation.”

Includes information from Arizona Republic reporters Robert Anglen and Jen Fifield.