

Meet the other resistance: the Republican one

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William F. Weld is not likely to become our 46th president. But he was here in New Hampshire, no other Republicans were and that was something.

“I think it’s important to at least call out the current incumbent of the White House on his simply amazing behaviour, and for the pettiness, his vindictiveness and the unreconstituted meanness he displays,” Weld was telling the crowd who had turned out to see him on a rainy Sunday afternoon in March at a house party in the town of Dover. Fergus Cullen, a former chairman of the state Republican Party, was hosting the gathering in his honour.

Weld, a two-term Republican governor of Massachusetts more than two decades ago, is 73, tall and slim with a mop of orange hair and a face the hue of Pepto-Bismol. A Harvard and Oxford graduate, Weld worked in the Reagan Justice Department but quit over a series of ethics scandals involving his boss, Attorney General Ed Meese. He ran briefly for governor of New York after leaving Massachusetts, endorsed Obama in 2008 and raised a bunch of money for Romney in 2012. He has written thrillers, dabbled in historical fiction and was last heard from in 2016 as the vice-presidential running mate to the Libertarian nominee, Gary Johnson. He sets off some dilettante alarms.

But he was the only Republican candidate who had announced his exploratory plans — he would officially declare his candidacy in April — to run against Donald Trump in the 2020 Republican primary. This made him the lone official vehicle for the aspirations of a persistent group of Never Trump Republicans. For the better part of two years, they had waited for a premium primary challenger to come along from a fantasy field of Nikki Haleys, Ben Sasses and Mitt Romneys — all of whom eventually opted out of running. Even Weld seemed disappointed by this. “I have been astounded that no one else has stepped forward,” he told the assembled guests.

So holdouts of the battered GOP establishment had, for now at least, gathered in Weld’s slim lifeboat. Stuart Stevens, just two presidential election cycles removed from being Mitt Romney’s chief strategist in 2012, is advising Weld and accompanied him in New Hampshire. Jennifer Horn, a two-time congressional candidate and the former New Hampshire Republican chairwoman, is running his communications. Cullen and his wife, Jenny, opened their home to Weld and 80 or so supportive guests, what you might call Whole Foods Republicans.

Weld seemed to be enjoying himself. “I knew I was going to have a good time here,” Weld said, warming up the crowd. “But what I didn’t know is that Jenny and I both played Yum-Yum in ‘The Mikado.’ ” This is not the kind of icebreaker you typically hear at a Trump rally.

He went on to bemoan the “New York City and Palm Beach socialite” and “malignant narcissist” in the White House. “As you can tell, I have a lot of crows to pick with this guy,” Weld said. “He cottons to dictators.” Trump does not appreciate that America is a melting pot, Weld continued. “Adolf Hitler didn’t like it, either.”

The depth of Weld's alarm over Trump, he explained, was informed by his experience in the Meese Justice Department (where, as head of the criminal division, he appointed a young Robert Mueller as the U.S. attorney in Boston). It was there that he saw the danger of law enforcement's becoming enmeshed with politics. "Republicans in Washington have become the silence of the lambs when it comes to Trump," Weld said. "Hopefully we can show at least a few people that we're not all a bunch of lambs."

The crowd in Cullen's living room applauded. People came up to Weld afterward, many of them actual Republicans who do not care for Trump — maybe a 10-to-20-per cent subgroup of the party, but probably bigger here in New Hampshire, where Weld rents a house and says he plans to spend the bulk of his campaign time. "When someone steps forward to say things publicly that so many Republicans have been willing to say privately," Cullen said of Weld, "to me that person deserves support, encouragement and a little bit of help."

Primary challenges are like the NFL draft, an exercise that exists almost entirely in hype, speculation and on TV. The prospects almost never pan out. There will be plenty of disappointment and dashed expectations. But getting there will yield opportunity, if only to state who you are and what you stand for — or what your party is and what it stands for.

And who is to say where this four-year rumble ride we've all been on will land us — or to whom it will lead us? Who saw Pete Buttigieg coming from South Bend, or Tom Brady in the sixth round, or for that matter, Trump on the escalator? In a span of a few months, something called Michael Avenatti can go from every cable channel in America to Iowa to (maybe) prison. Trump's victory crippled so many of our notions of political certainty — of who or what can be safely discounted.

Trump's support among Republican voters has been a rare solid line in an otherwise whiplashing presidency. As such, the notion of an anti-Trump Republican has a certain Jews-for-Jesus disconnect about it. There is no question that resistance to Trump inside the GOP has proved a treacherous road. While there appeared to be some semblance of an opposition to Trump inside the GOP in 2016 even after he won the party nomination, the dissidents in Republican officialdom steadily dropped off as he settled into the White House. They died (John McCain, George and Barbara Bush), made their various Faustian bargains (Paul Ryan, Lindsey Graham), confronted voters in Trump-friendly places and self-neutered accordingly (Ted Cruz in Texas, Mitt Romney in Utah), retired (Senators Bob Corker and Jeff Flake) or were primaried out of their misery (Rep. Mark Sanford).

The diehard remnant population of Never Trumpers comes most visibly from the class of Republican consultants, conservative media personalities and a few GOP office-holders safely removed from the considerations of re-election campaigns. The best-known Never Trumpers have seen their profiles soar in disproportion to their actual influence among Republicans. Still, "there is merit in maintaining a rebel army," the Republican strategist Rick Wilson told me. "There is a moral case to be made for standing up for nonauthoritarian conservatism."

There is also money to be made: Wilson's anti-Trump manifesto, "Everything Trump Touches Dies," became an instant No. 1 New York Times bestseller in 2018, and he is now a constant cable-TV presence. He has another book on the way, lucrative speaking gigs coming in and magazine assignments — though he says it has not offset the \$4.5 million in income he estimates he has lost in recent years from would-be clients.

But despite this heightened media presence, waging what has become a shrinking insurgency can exact a psychic toll. “I’m not going to pretend that I’m not disappointed that we’ve had this attrition,” said Charlie Sykes, a conservative former radio host in Wisconsin whose umbrage over Trump has gained him cable ubiquity and a book of his own (*How the Right Lost Its Mind*). “It’s been this rolling, soul-crushing disappointment, watching people that you thought you knew.” But this, he added, had only strengthened his conviction. “It’s really not a hard choice,” he said. “There are advantages to being an only child.”

Never Trumpers are not so much a political movement as they are a slingshot army aimed at a single target. Finding someone to challenge Trump in a primary has been a persistent preoccupation. There have been varying degrees of hope. Jeff Flake, the Arizona senator, enjoyed a small boomlet in 2017 with his sustained critiques of Trump from the Senate and did not rule out running — until he did, and signed on as a commentator with CBS. John Kasich, the former Ohio governor whom Trump defeated in the 2016 primaries, has remained a kind of default possibility as someone who ran before, has continued to criticize Trump and appears to still irritate him, for whatever that’s worth.

“All options are on the table, that’s all I can tell you,” Kasich said when I reached him by phone, before caveating: “I’ve got a lot of things. I’m starting a company. I’m at CNN, writing a book, speeches and a lot of things.”

Wilson told me he hoped that the former defence secretary Jim Mattis, who recently exited the Pentagon over his differences with Trump on NATO and troop commitments, would run. (Not happening, per the Mattis camp.) “If you had asked me a month ago, I would have said Ben Sasse,” Sykes said, referring to the Republican senator from Nebraska who is an occasionally vocal Trump critic, though one who reliably votes with the president. But Sasse lost Sykes when he voted in support of the president’s effort to declare a national emergency at the Southern border as a means of attaining funding for his long-promised border wall. Just as well: “The only race Ben’s thinking about is his re-election,” said James Wegmann, Sasse’s spokesman.

Sykes and others have also been talking up Rep. Mike Gallagher, a handsome Marine from Wisconsin, who opposed Trump’s emergency declaration, has criticized him on occasion and just turned 35. “That would be my fantasy choice,” Sykes told me. And a fantasy he will remain: “There is no need to include Rep. Gallagher in this piece,” his spokesman, Jordan Dunn, told me when I asked about Gallagher’s presidential prospects. “He supports President Trump.”

“To me it was always the fundamental character of the man,” William Kristol, the conservative pundit, told me. We were eating lunch at a restaurant near the office of *The Bulwark*, the conservative online publication and Never Trump redoubt Kristol helped start in January, with Charlie Sykes as its editor in chief. “It is one thing to have a president of conventionally bad character, or even questionable character. But it is such another scale entirely with Trump.”

Kristol has been trying to recruit a primary challenger starting pretty much on Election Day 2016 — though “‘recruit’ is the wrong word,” he said. “It’s not as if I can just snap my fingers and get someone to run.” (That seemed self-evident enough.) He prefers the word “catalyst.”

Kristol belongs to the category of affable gasbag that Trump marginalized as a relic of whatever nonpopulist establishment still exists inside the GOP: He was the chief of staff to Vice President Dan Quayle, a loud and influential champion of invading Iraq (which he predicted on C-SPAN

would be a “two-month war, not an eight-year war”) and someone who has probably picked over as many green room fruit plates as anyone in Washington.

In the early days of the new administration, Kristol and other shell-shocked conservatives around Washington started getting together to commiserate. One of the more regular meetings took place every other Tuesday morning, hosted by the Niskanen Center, a new libertarian think tank started by alumni of the Cato Institute. Hosted by Niskanen’s co-founder, Jerry Taylor, the meetings — which participants called “the Meeting of the Concerned” — were held in a conference room in the basement of the CNN building near Union Station.

The gatherings attracted a roster of right-of-center familiars: the columnists Mona Charen, David Frum and Jennifer Rubin; the former Oklahoma representative Mickey Edwards; and one-time Republican administration officials like Linda Chavez. They were invitation-only and off the record. Guest speakers were brought in, along with bagels. “There was a lot of discussion around what exactly is going on in the Republican Party,” recalled Sarah Longwell, a D.C. trade association, think tank and advocacy veteran who was a semiregular attendee. “We were trying to figure out whether Trump was a symptom or cause.”

It was at these confabs that Longwell met Kristol, co-founder of The Weekly Standard, a conservative journal that became an outlet for Trump criticism until it ceased publication last December. (Kristol attributed The Standard’s demise to the hostility it faced as an anti-Trump organ operating inside the Trump-dominated right — an antipathy he said extended to its financial backers.) The two started Defending Democracy Together, an organization that among other things aimed to resist Trump and Trumpism inside the Republican Party.

Kristol had tried to stand athwart the Trump train before. In early 2016, as Trump consolidated his hold on the Republican nomination over a field of increasingly hapless opponents, Kristol sought out potential independent candidates to run against him. That April, along with Joel Searby, a Republican strategist, and Rick Wilson, Kristol made overtures to Mattis, the eventual secretary of defence, about a possible run. Mattis considered it seriously, Kristol said, but opted not to.

Kristol met with Romney in early May, again to no avail. Later that month, he seemed to at least hook a much smaller fish: David French, a constitutional lawyer and National Review writer, whose brief interest was sufficient to annoy Trump. “If dummy Bill Kristol actually does get a spoiler to run as an Independent, say goodbye to the Supreme Court!” he tweeted.

Then in July, Kristol received an email from a former C.I.A. operations officer and congressional staff member named Evan McMullin, saying he was open to running. McMullin announced his candidacy in August. Searby ran his campaign, with help from Wilson. McMullin managed a decent showing (21.3 per cent) in his home state of Utah, but finished with 0.54 per cent of the vote nationally in November. In his postelection rallies, Trump made a running joke of having no idea who McMullin was.

Starting in 2018, Kristol and Longwell commissioned focus groups and polling of Republican voters to gauge the strength and depth of Trump’s support inside the GOP. They concluded, based on the research, that it was soft. It is not so much about any particular issues, Longwell told me. The respondents approved of many things Trump had done in office, particularly his conservative judicial appointments and his tax policies and deregulation agenda. It was more of a

general weariness. “We hear the word ‘exhaustion’ a lot,” Longwell explained when I met her in March in the lobby bar of the Madison Hotel, a few blocks from the White House. “That’s where Trump is vulnerable.”

The “gettable Republicans,” as she called them, are focused on Trump’s overall behaviour and the toll he takes on politics and American society in general. “There’s this feeling that things are a little too hot and a little too angry,” Longwell said. “It comes out in our focus groups, absolutely. Our president should not live in our heads this way.”

It’s easy to be skeptical of this conclusion, given Longwell’s and Kristol’s possible confirmation biases, not to mention Kristol’s past misadventures as a prognosticator (The Washington Post’s Paul Farhi has called him “a kind of cult figure of wrong”). But it is at least partly backed up by some recent polls of New Hampshire and Iowa voters, which show that around 40 per cent of Republicans would at least like to consider an alternative. Axios recently reported the findings of a focus group of Ohio voters who supported both Obama and Trump. They mostly craved “normalcy.”

In fashioning a message for a potential challenger, Kristol said the trick is to get people to envision what another four years of Trump might look like. “The retrospective judgment is not the same as the prospective judgment,” he told me. There is a tendency among voters to hold on to what initially made them pull the lever for Trump. “He’s better than Hillary” remains a powerful argument to them nearly two and a half years after the last race ended. “There’s a reason Trump likes to keep relitigating 2016,” Kristol told me. “The prospective case for Trump is harder to make.”

Beating it, of course, requires a case for someone else, and Kristol had not yet found that person — but he was not giving up yet. In a few days, he would be attending the Baltimore Orioles’ opening day at Camden Yards as a guest of Larry Hogan, the Republican governor of Maryland.

On a recent Monday afternoon in Annapolis, Gov. Hogan sat in his office, musing over a question about what nicknames Trump might come up with if he were to run against him: “Cancer Boy,” maybe — he overcame non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma in 2015 — or “Fat Larry.” He chuckled.

Hogan, who is 62, resembles a driver’s ed instructor: built like a fire plug, thick glasses, barking cadence. He became the instant Never Trump front-runner in November after he was overwhelmingly re-elected to a second term in the solidly blue state, in part on account of his vocal criticism of Trump. He then made an obliging visit to the Niskanen Center in December. He is term-limited, has little use for Trump and has ruled out nothing for 2020. The Washington Post columnist and Never Trump eminence George F. Will, noting the intense chemotherapy Hogan underwent while in office, surmised “he has endured something almost as unpleasant as Donald Trump.”

When I met him, Hogan had just finished his weekly news conference, in which he became animated about the battered state of the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. “It’s outrageous and unacceptable,” he told reporters. “I mean, you have potholes practically swallowing cars.” There was something refreshing, in 2019, about watching a chief executive hold forth on something as workaday as pavement after a weekend in which the actual chief executive of the federal government had railed on Twitter against everything from his portrayal on “Saturday Night

Live” (a rerun) to John McCain’s “last in his class” rank at the Naval Academy (60-plus years ago) to the travesty of Jeanine Pirro’s suspension by Fox News.

Hogan seemed to be enjoying the role of hypothetical Republican alternative. To a question about the trip he made to Iowa at the beginning of March, he pointed out that he was the vice chairman of the National Governors Association, and Iowa happened to be where one of its regional workshops was held, so nothing to see there. “I thought it would just be great to spend 48 hours in sub-zero temperatures in Des Moines,” he deadpanned. “But that doesn’t mean I’m actually running for anything.” He took another question about whether he might run or not.

Hogan likes to remind people that he was the first Republican governor in 2016 to say he could not vote for Donald Trump, whom he opposed on general character and temperament grounds — just the opposite of the kind of panting allegiance to the president that you often hear from elected Republicans. Instead, Hogan wrote in his late father, Lawrence Hogan, a three-term Maryland representative in the 1970s. The elder Hogan, who died in 2017, was the only Republican member of the House Judiciary Committee to vote for all three articles of impeachment against President Nixon. Hogan’s father counselled him to do something else for a while before getting into politics, and he spent much of his adult life as a real estate developer. He had run unsuccessfully for Congress but never held any elected office until, at 57, he won an upset victory in 2014.

“I’m boring,” Hogan said in his office, excitedly. He pointed to something that the Johns Hopkins political scientist Yascha Mounk told *The Times* last year: “For the last two years it’s been impossible to go to a bar on a Monday night and not have to talk about politics. Most Americans are sick of that. I think you can win in 2020 by promising that if you become president, people can go back to talking about football.” Americans, Hogan told me, wanted a president who would “just fix stuff.”

“Just Fix Stuff” is about as close as Hogan comes to putting forth a governing philosophy. He talks about his ability to “reach across the aisle” and be “less divisive” and restore a more inclusive tradition in the party. (That may be a relative proposition: Amid a heated legislative fight with the Maryland General Assembly last month, Hogan accused Democrats of being “pro-criminal.”) “I think the party has been sort of hijacked by this guy that really is not a traditional Republican,” he said of Trump.

As we spoke, it was hard to ascertain what Hogan’s animating reason for doing something like this would be, whether he has any particular passion for ideas or theory of the future — or whether he is entertaining the notion simply because he has a high approval rating (69 per cent, per a Goucher Poll in February). He told me he’s not willing to launch a “suicide mission” against Trump if he has no chance. And he is not really thinking about a campaign, except when people ask him about it (which they do all the time, he mentions — all the time). Anyway, a lot can change. Filing deadlines are a ways off, he pointed out.

I asked why, if Hogan was not really thinking about running for president, he would be visiting Iowa and New Hampshire in consecutive months. As he began to answer, his communications director, Mike Ricci, jumped in to say he had to leave soon for an appointment with someone named Traffic Jam Jimmy. “Traffic Jam Jimmy is a nice guy from Fox 45,” the governor explained. “He does traffic in the morning. He’s a character. I could ride around in the car with him; we could talk all afternoon.”

Ricci left to check in with Traffic Jam Jimmy. “What were you saying?” Hogan asked, turning back to me. “Oh, yes, New Hampshire.” He had accepted an invitation to speak at the regular “Politics and Eggs” breakfast hosted by St. Anselm College — the same event where Weld announced his exploratory committee in February.

Kristol has been egging Hogan on, telling him that if he runs, the Republican ground might be more accommodating than he thinks. There will be ample donors, staff and supporters waiting to help him. He was hopeful that the special prosecutor Robert Mueller’s Russia investigation report might nudge the governor a bit closer to running.

Still, when we spoke early this month, Kristol seemed to be hedging his bets. “I just sent Weld a check for a thousand bucks,” he said.