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Bill Weld Has Nothing to Lose

A look at our former governor's last (and wildest) hurrah.

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William Floyd Weld—6-foot-4, strawberry blond, and descended from Pilgrims—is delivering a speech at a Japanese-themed cocktail lounge on the mezzanine level of the Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino in Las Vegas. More accurately, he's shouting the speech because this is Vegas and a bass line is pulsing from a speaker near his head. Roughly half of his remarks are audible: "The two-party system in Washington has been a monopoly for so long…. They're dinosaurs!… And this year the Libertarian Party is going to be the comet that takes out the dinosaurs!" A few hoots register as Weld works his way to the kicker he's been road-testing: "This year…let's kick some…asteroid!" He grins sheepishly.

Not his best work. But given the circumstances, appropriate. It is a Friday in July and the setting is FreedomFest 2016, an outré political smorgasbord that bills itself as "The World's Largest Gathering of Free Minds." Weld, the former governor of Massachusetts, is here in his capacity as the vice-presidential nominee of the Libertarian Party, alongside his running mate, former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson. FreedomFest leans conservative, but the vibe is more antiestablishment than it is pro-anything.

Quick tour of the premises: The Muslims4Liberty booth is handing out free Korans near the Libertarian Illness Prevention guy offering rides on a $14,000 exercise bike. Gold-bullion salesmen mingle with standard-issue "Big Brother Is Watching" pamphleteers. George Foreman and Don King are around, for some reason. "Bill wants me to be nearby in case any weirdo buttonholes him," says Marshall Bradlee, Weld's 24-year-old stepson and bodyman.

In Massachusetts politics, the adjective "Weldian" connotes a WASP-y, statesmanlike moderation shared by his Republican successors Mitt Romney and Charlie Baker, and not by the FreedomFest habitués dressed in flag-and-jeans. "He doesn't come across as the kind of person running on a third-party ticket," says David Boaz, the executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute. "He comes across as the kind of person having dinner with the Bushes."

But the Bushes are out, Donald Trump is in, and Weld's brand of Republicanism is no longer interesting to the GOP rank and file. Twenty years ago, Weld was the governor of Massachusetts

and a rising star. Affable, wealthy, and quick-witted, he floated to two terms on Beacon Hill. He was POTUS material. A Republican Kennedy. Or maybe he was a comet. Almost as quickly as he ascended the national ranks, the party lurched rightward and Weld more or less disappeared from political life.

Until recently, Weld, 71, was living quietly in Canton with his second wife, journalist and novelist Leslie Marshall, and working for the powerful lobbying/consulting firm ML Strategies, headquartered across the street from South Station. The work was heady; he represented General Electric and Steve Wynn in their bids to set up shop in the area. But it wasn't the political highlife he'd once envisioned. For a figure as singular (and wealthy) as Weld, corporate influence-peddling felt like an uninspired final chapter.

Then Donald Trump happened. And once the Grand Old Party officially staked its future on a television boss hawking 2,000 miles of raised concrete, there was renewed demand for sagacity in conservative circles. William Weld, Boston Brahmin, was suddenly back in vogue.

Part of this owed to personality. Temperamentally, at least, Weld is a near-perfect avatar for the #NeverTrump movement. Trump has conceded that he doesn't read whole books, just "passages." Weld might drop a casual reference to Walter Muir Whitehill's *Boston: A Topographical History*into a conversation. Trump has the interior-decorating sensibility of a 1980s dictator. Shabby-chic, Weld looks like an extra in a Whit Stillman movie. Trump is a teetotaler, Weld a proud boozer. This list goes on forever.

But the peculiarity of the 2016 election suggests Johnson and Weld will be more than just a pressure-relief valve for disgruntled Never Trumpers (or Bernie Bros, for that matter). Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, polling says, are among the least popular candidates ever to represent their respective tickets. At a time when both candidates have adopted aggressively interventionist platforms, the *Whatever* party is betting that its laissez-faire stance on social and economic issues will hold unprecedented appeal.

So far, so good. When Weld and Johnson began bum-rushing newspaper editorial boards and cable news shows in their quest for free media, their poll numbers rose and disconsolate party elders began to perk up. If the Never Trump crowd had a complaint, it was that Big Red wasn't featured prominently enough. "If Bill Weld were at the top of the ticket," Mitt Romney said in June, "it would be very easy for me to vote for [him]."

Two decades removed from serious White House ambitions, Weld probably—okay, almost certainly—won't get there on the Libertarian ticket. But he might play a larger role than just about anyone in deciding who does. Less than a couple of weeks before FreedomFest, a journalist asked if Johnson fretted playing "spoiler" to one of the two major candidates. Weld's blue eyes twinkled—his eyes really twinkle—and he asked a question of his own: "What's to spoil?"

Before our first interview, in June, Weld's handlers tell me to meet the candidate at his hotel—the Holiday Inn, midtown Manhattan branch. Weld, wearing a pinstriped suit, is as surprised as I am at his low-budget accommodations. "One hundred fourteen a night!" he says, mystified. "I've never heard of a New York hotel where it starts with a 'one.'"

Our meeting was originally scheduled at the venerable Algonquin Hotel, where the great American satirists of the early 20th century sat around getting hammered—the sort of oak-paneled watering hole with which Weld is familiar. The author of three books himself, Weld muses, "The Algonquin has the worst food in New York City. The food tastes like water." By the time we move on to the drinking, he has a far-off look in his eyes. "I mean, you think about Robert Benchley and Dorothy Parker. All the pearls. God, what a wonderful time…."

Weld has a way of perpetuating his own myth: that of the old-money bon vivant who stumbles in and out of power, forever more interested in living well than in governing at all. The caricature isn't completely inaccurate. Of Weld's second inaugural address as governor, his former head speechwriter Robert Byrnes says, "He was wasted, no question about it. He said, 'Let's get these chairs out of the way; let's dance the night away!' There weren't any chairs.''

Indeed, from the cheap seats, much of Weld's life has seemed like a jolly, meandering quest to stave off boredom. "I sat down in my twenties to write the Great American Novel and nothing came out the end of the pen because I had nothing to say," he once said while doing publicity for one of his books. "I really still have nothing to say." It would be fair to assume that a third-party vice- presidential run was Weld's latest extracurricular diversion. "There's nothing more he would like than to be flying around the country on somebody else's dime, flying first class, and talking to political reporters all day," says a former top adviser.

Putting aside the Libertarian ticket's no-frills travel budget, Weld says he has other motivations. Doctrinally, Weld says, he's always identified with the party. His political reincarnation isn't a field trip. It's a homecoming. "My first press conference as governor," he says, "I greeted the press with the words 'Fellow libertarians.' They laughed rather nervously."

On Beacon Hill, Weld ushered in an era of Republican gubernatorial dominance by upending assumptions about what the party could stand for. Weld was wide left of the Democratic Party on several social issues, most prominently gay rights. He was also a fiscal hawk. In the heyday of Ron Paul's crypto-racist monthly newsletters, Weld was the rare high-rent practitioner of libertarian laissez-faire.

This made an impression on Johnson, who served as New Mexico's governor from 1995 to 2003 and calls Weld his "role model." Before the party's nominating convention in May, a Johnson staffer emailed Weld out of the blue to gauge his interest in the veep slot. Weld was interested. "The stars were in alignment," he explains. "If John Kasich were the nominee, would I be running? No, I don't think so." Weld hopped on the phone and accepted the offer. Johnson all

but fainted: “I was just numb. Bill Weld was so far above the list that I had assembled. So I was numb beyond my wildest expectations.”

Alas, Libertarians were not. Weld could name-check *The Road to Serfdom* all he liked, but the party’s base found him suspect. And without their approval, he wouldn’t land on the ticket. The mistrust stemmed partly from past failing grades on acid tests such as gun control (for it) and criminal justice (hard-line). And partly it stemmed from Weld’s aborted 2006 run for governor of New York, when he opportunistically ran on a Libertarian ticket, then left the party in the lurch when he realized his actual goal—the Republican nomination—was unattainable. Most crucially, he didn’t really *seem* libertarian. “Gary [Johnson] is definitely a mountain-state, ‘Hey, I’m a triathlete, maybe I’ll smoke some Santeria’ kind of guy,” says *Reason* magazine editor at large Matt Welch. “Weld feels like yesterday’s news—the technocratic, good-government Republican governor.”

All of this resulted in an awkward Libertarian Party National Convention this past May in Orlando, where Johnson spent 75 hours trying to convince a large group of anarchists to vote for the man in pinstripes. (He was booed.) His basic pitch was that Weld would rescue the party from the sad periphery of American politics. Libertarians, though, kind of like the sad periphery. Faced with a choice between possible relevance and certain irrelevance, the party was split. “One of the interesting things about libertarianism,” says Massachusetts party official Dan Fishman, “is we don’t believe people need to be led, because people aren’t sheep.” On the second ballot, Weld barely secured the VP nomination with 50.5 percent of the vote.

Naturally, Weld and Johnson insist they’re gunning for the White House. Their opponents not only have historically crummy disapproval ratings, but they can seem weirdly out of step with the ideological trend lines of their respective parties. Libertarians, who skew left of Hillary Clinton on certain issues (war, drugs) and right of Trump on others (trade, healthcare) believe they’re poised to capitalize on the dissonance.

In the short term, though, the realistic goal is not to compete with Trump or Clinton, but to poll at 15 percent—the number needed to qualify for presidential debates. To get there, the two candidates have assumed different roles. Johnson, with his running shoes and Beaker-from-the-Muppets hairdo, has tried to pivot the party to a friendlier, less Ayn Randian place. (Until January he was CEO of the marijuana-products company Cannabis Sativa, essentially a high-end pot dealer.) Weld, in turn, is pitching the Never Trump people. He spends half his time hurling Jimmy Stewart–vintage insults at the Donald—*Huckster! Pied Piper!*—and the other half dialing depressed Republican donors with nowhere to park their cash.

By midsummer, after the campaign and its various semi-affiliated Super PACs began airing television ads, Johnson was in uncharted territory, polling as high as 13 percent. Weld, meanwhile, was running around comparing the Republican Party to extinct species like dinosaurs and Whigs. “My first reaction at not carrying around the Republican Party’s social policies on

my back as I have been for 25 years was: 'Free! Free at last!'" he told the audience at FreedomFest. "I think I've had a little bit of a conversion."

The very first Weld to attend Harvard College, John Weld, was expelled in 1644 for stealing 11 pounds of cash and 30 shillings' worth of gunpowder. Inaugural college president Henry Dunster personally issued the lad a whipping. Since then, the family has stayed more or less upright: Hundreds of Welds are rumored to have graduated from Harvard, and the letters W-E-L-D have long been etched all over Cambridge. Technically, the family made its fortune in railways, banking, and other plutocratic avocations, but the concept of earning a living has always been a little beside the point. As the unofficial family slogan goes, "The Welds don't make money, they have money."

William Weld, whose Brahmin name alone conjures images of sloe gin and tasseled loafers, did right by his lineage. Born onto a 600-acre estate on Long Island, he attended Middlesex School, Oxford University, and Harvard (twice). He married Susan Roosevelt, great-granddaughter of Teddy, and plunged into politics and law enforcement. In the 1970s, he worked alongside one Hillary Rodham on the House Judiciary Committee's Nixon impeachment inquiry staff. As a Department of Justice prosecutor during the 1980s, he litigated high-profile public corruption (Mayor Kevin White's staffers) and RICO (La Cosa Nostra) cases. When Ronald Reagan's attorney general, Edwin Meese, was investigated for some graft of his own, in 1988, Weld resigned and returned to Boston. Two years later, he ran for governor.

Weld wasn't supposed to win. The only other race he'd ever run—for attorney general in 1978—he'd lost by more than a million votes. His gubernatorial opponent, John Silber, was a pugnacious, whip-smart son of a bitch with a hook for a left hand and—more important—the support of the Democratic Party, which no longer seemed capable of losing elections in Massachusetts. "I remember once in 1990 we were running low on money, sitting in his living room in Cambridge," says political consultant Stuart Stevens, who worked on Weld's campaign. "He said kind of off-hand, 'We can always sell this painting.' Everybody thought it was a joke. And then as we were leaving, Weld was like, 'No, I'm serious.' I was like, 'We're going to be okay, man.' It was a Singer Sargent." Weld ultimately eked out the win.

On Beacon Hill, the effortless grace kept on coming. He'd pepper staff memos with Latin. Twice a week, he'd interrupt whatever he was doing to play squash. "He is old money, white, and fucking brilliant," says a former staffer. "Everybody tries to distance himself from those traits when running for office, and he always embraced them and made them his own." Weld intuited that voters would reward WASP authenticity over a feigned everyman shtick. Famously, after Senate President Billy Bulger ribbed him about his *Mayflower* ancestry, Weld rose to correct the record. "Actually," he said, "they weren't on the *Mayflower*. They sent the servants over to get the cottage ready first."

Weld's intellectual swagger trickled down. One night, he decided he needed a speech written at the last minute, but didn't want to miss the Sox game at Fenway, Byrnes says. "So he taunted me: 'You're gonna come to the game too, right?' First person I see is his buddy Charlie Steele, with seven beers in his hand. Susan Weld is sitting next to him, reading a book in Chinese. Then I went back afterwards and I wrote the speech." Drunk, sober, gay, straight, Charlie Baker—Weld didn't care who worked for him, as long as they were competent during business hours. During his first term, Weld balanced a bloated state budget without raising taxes and presided over a major drop in unemployment.

Voters found Weld's swashbuckling energy irresistible, and in 1994 elected him to a second term by more than a 40-point margin (in a state that was 15 percent Republican). Afterward, a light bulb went off and Weld began traveling the country to gauge support for a 1996 presidential bid. "He was very serious," says a former campaign official, but the GOP didn't seem eager for a moderate. The new plan would be to establish DC cred by defeating fellow plutocrat John Kerry in a bid for the U.S. Senate. Weld's strategy, which involved beating a popular incumbent Democrat during a high-turnout presidential-year election, in retrospect didn't make much sense. He wound up resorting to absurd attacks on Kerry's wealth—*"Senator, if your name was John Six-Pack instead of John Forbes Kerry…"*—and lost by eight points.

The Kerry defeat, Weld's ex-staffers say, left their man disconsolate. So Weld, who suffers from a kind of political restless leg syndrome, decided it was as good a time as any to leave Beacon Hill. "He has a short attention span," says a former top deputy. "He got bored being governor."

And that's when things started to get random. Weld decided it might be neat to serve as U.S. ambassador to Mexico, and in 1997 he announced his resignation before the end of his term. It was stunning enough that Weld would turn his back on an ascendant political trajectory to assume a second-rate ambassadorship. Even more baffling was the difficulty he had securing the post. At the time, archconservative North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms held the keys to the cabana. To Helms, Weld was the one-man amnesty/abortion/acid wing of the GOP and certainly didn't deserve to be rewarded for his liberal heresies. Conventional wisdom held that Weld could have won over Helms by visiting him in his office and kissing his ring. Weld preferred otherwise. "I wouldn't go on bended knee, and I wouldn't kiss anything," he reasoned, and he never received confirmation from the U.S. Senate.

There was a ballsy righteousness to Weld's stand, though all it really did was ensure that he and his prodigious *cojones* wound up well north of sunny Mexico, in political Siberia. A figure who a few years earlier had generated serious White House consideration was suddenly a pariah to his party and an ex-governor without a job. "If I had to do it over again," he says now, "I would serve out my second term and run again [for president] in 2000."

Instead, what followed were nearly two decades of alternately predictable and baffling career choices. He worked in law. He moved to Manhattan's Upper East Side, joined a private equity

firm, where it appears he schmoozed clients while his colleagues did the quant work, and remarried. He finished his third fictional potboiler. He launched a kamikaze gubernatorial bid in a state he hadn't lived in since the 1960s. He spent several weeks a year in Ulan Bator, Mongolia, helping run the world's largest gold and copper mine. By 2012, he was back in Boston, working for ML Strategies.

Even Weld can't ignore the fact that as his political career petered out, two lesser Massachusetts politicians—Mitt Romney and John Kerry—were busy scoring presidential nominations or running the State Department. Both conspicuously lack Weld's personal charm and political instincts, but they're better at coloring inside party lines. A quixotic third-party run, though, plays to Weld's strengths. Staring down a GOP completely unrecognizable to him, Weld is now free to adopt the same insurgent mentality he did when disrupting Massachusetts' one-party hegemony in the 1990s. "This is sort of a triple bank shot," says a former aide. "He loves triple bank shots."

It is dusk on a Thursday in late June as Weld and I recline in our Adirondack chairs, looking out at the Atlantic Ocean. From the back we look like the stars of an edgy new Cialis commercial. Weld is being honored by Boston Harbor Now, at a $500-a-plate fundraiser on Georges Island. The usual suspects—Foley Hoag, Suffolk Construction, the Dewey Square Group—are well represented. Weld's frenemy, former Governor Mike Dukakis, also being feted, is in attendance. The occasion is as clubby, white, and middle-aged as you'd hope. Those who do not wear Sebago Docksides wear Sperry Top-Siders.

Compared with, say, FreedomFest 2016, Weld is in his comfort zone. And the politically homeless Republicans swaying to Earth Wind & Fire tonight are his target voters. Weld's strategy isn't to try to defend libertarian ideas. Instead he articulates the ones he thinks disaffected centrists want to hear. When Johnson suggests abolishing the Internal Revenue Service, Weld raises an eyebrow and clarifies that he wouldn't go that far. When asked about gun control, Weld suggests the formation—cue a million Libertarians choking on their dinner—of a massive new FBI task force.

Keep up the Reagan act, the thinking goes, and he's back on prime time come October. "There were these debates with 16 candidates," Weld says. "'Little Marco and Lyin' Ted and Crooked Hillary.' That's all [Trump] said. There's no content there…. It's like everyone else was scared of him." In their place, Weld says, he'd zing Trump with that vintage demagogue rejoinder: "Have you, alas sir, no sense of decency or shame?" "That's exactly what I'm going to say," Weld pledges.

All of that sounds convincing enough until you start to think about it: Because it's not the silver-tongued Weld who would be appearing before 67 million television viewers to disembowel Trump, but his utterly charming but not so articulate running mate, Gary Johnson. Meanwhile, nobody will be watching Weld trade jabs with Mike Pence.

With few exceptions—Weld's ex-great-grandfather-in-law Teddy Roosevelt scored 27 percent of the vote in 1912; Ross Perot tallied 19 percent in 1992—third parties in America do not perform well. In 1980, the Libertarian Party's VP nominee was Koch brother David Koch, who advocated the elimination of every major governmental agency. Today, the party has broadened considerably under Johnson and is more likely to be associated with Willie Nelson and Edward Snowden than granny-starving budget cuts and *Mad Max*–style paramilitary groups. Even if Johnson and Weld don't win the election outright, party strategists argue that they could deny both Trump and Clinton the 270 electoral votes necessary to win. From there, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, which doesn't seem particularly keen on either major nominee, could split the difference and hand the presidency to Johnson.

Still, it's a long shot. The party may have had a record showing in 2012, but that record showing garnered just one percent of the general election vote. Assuming Clinton doesn't succumb to unforeseen scandal, or Trump doesn't drop out of the race, or Johnson doesn't morph into a world-class orator, the ticket can best make its presence felt not by taking the White House, but by denying it to someone else. The question is, who?

The answer is…not clear. Polls show that Clinton's overall lead over Trump tends to dip about a percentage point when Johnson's name is included. "Trump voters are mainly Trump voters," Monmouth University pollster Patrick Murray told Politico in August. "But Clinton voters are still not quite happy that they're going to end up voting for her." Which is to say: If Weld siphons support from Never Trumpers who have *already* defected from the Donald, he's more likely to pull from Hillary Clinton. And come November 9, he could be generating comparisons to the dread Ralph Nader.

At the start of the campaign, Weld might have been haunted by the thought. Here was a man who compared Trump's immigration proposal to Kristallnacht. When a CNN anchor asked him which candidate was more qualified to be president, he answered Clinton without hesitation. But by midsummer, he had stopped vouching for her. "All I'm thinking about now is winning the whole shooting match," he said during a panel discussion at FreedomFest. Next time a TV anchor asked him the Trump versus Hillary question, he added, he'd merely respond, "I'm voting Libertarian and I'm not going to lose any sleep over it."

Considering the Libertarian Party will not, in fact, be winning the whole shooting match, one might naturally wonder why else Weld might be running for high office. Several loyalists surmised that the specter of Trump was appalling enough to pull him out of political retirement. But the majority of the Weldologists I spoke with suggested that to understand Weld's late-career renaissance, one had to take into account the rest of his peripatetic résumé.

Weld's brother Tim, a doctor on Nantucket, once told a reporter that "Bill will do anything as long as he's challenged. He can't stand repetition." Weld himself has said his "greatest motivation in life is fear of boredom." In the context of a disruptive third-party run that could

deliver the nuclear codes to a certain billionaire man-child, Weld is making the same mischief he always has. “From the very beginning of his political career,” says his former press secretary, Ginny Buckingham, “he’s always been the skunk at the garden party.”

On the morning of the last day of FreedomFest, after watching a 15-minute rom-com about the perils of the surveillance state, I sit down with Weld for a final interview. He’s shed his pinstripes for light-washed blue jeans and a rugged brown suede jacket. He could be a rancher fresh off an armed protest against the federal tyranny of environmental regulation. But he doesn’t sound like one. I ask him, at random, about climate change. He advocates pragmatic, mainstream, and essentially unlibertarian ideas about the urgent need for governing bodies to prevent the rise of global temperatures by 2 degrees Celsius.

These aren’t ideas his free-market brethren take kindly to. He smiles. He doesn’t care: “I’m running as myself.”