

This Republican Is Running Against Donald Trump. Is Anybody Listening?

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Bill Weld leans back in a chair, hand on his hip, and talks about the Republican Party like someone who's been away for a while and is trying to get used to all the new development. "I know a lot of the Republicans in Washington, and they're good people," says the sandy-haired, ruddy-faced primary challenger to President Trump. "They're just cowed by this president somehow."

This was three days into his long-shot bid for president, and the former Massachusetts governor is talking in a Hilton Garden Inn lounge that looks out on the New Hampshire Fisher Cats' minor league baseball field. On his campaign's opening day, Weld declared he'd chase Trump as ferociously as a fisher cat, the weasel-like native of New Hampshire known for eating porcupines. But the president seems not to have noticed he has an angry 73-year-old on his tail, at least not one from his own party; Trump hasn't aimed so much as a tweet at his erstwhile opponent or bothered to taunt him with a nickname. Weld, however, is basically screaming at the TV. He's worked up over a news report that Trump aides fear the president's "wrath" because they talked to special counsel Robert Mueller.

"That's what we want in the office?" asks Weld. "Somebody so mercurial that everyone knows he can blow a gasket? That's not really what we want in the Oval Office. And I suppose that's an argument I would make, even to a Republican."

Even to a Republican. Weld tends to talk about his nominal party as if it were a once-proud civilization descended into barbarism. It's a reminder of Weld's estrangement from the Trump-era GOP, even as he runs in its primaries. In the 1990s, Weld was Massachusetts' socially liberal, budget-hawk Republican governor, but in the 22 years since he last held office he has strayed from the center of the GOP. He endorsed Barack Obama in 2008 and ran as the Libertarian candidate for vice-president in 2016. Now, Weld's trying to foment a revolt against Trump in live-free-or-die New Hampshire, where an open primary system offers him a chance to lure persuadable independents to the polls.

It won't be easy. Weld is the longest of long shots, his campaign a quixotic windmill-tilt, and not just because of Trump's enduring popularity among Republican voters. "Bill Weld is the base of the Republican Party 50 years ago, not the current base of the Republican Party," says Elaine Kamarck, a Brookings Institution senior fellow and author of the book *Primary Politics*.

“For a lot of Trump supporters, Weld is indistinguishable from a Democrat,” says Tom Nichols, a former Republican Senate staffer and author of *The Death of Expertise*. “He’s an East Coast, well-educated social liberal. [He] plays into the stereotype that Trump is trying to stick on all his opponents, as out-of-touch elitists.”

Proud of his two degrees from Harvard, where a dorm and boathouse are named after his family, Weld is forlornly out of place in the populist, Trump-era Republican Party. His Boston Brahmin eccentricities may stagger the NASCAR voter: he likes Gilbert and Sullivan operas and the Grateful Dead, and he once threw a party for his pet hedgehog, named Privet. Likewise, Weld’s libertarian mix of tolerance and budget cuts—which ushered in a still-vibrant era of Republican governors in liberal Massachusetts—is out of fashion in the immigrant-bashing, deficit-ballooning Trumpist GOP.

So on Fox News, Weld had to answer why voters should take him seriously, above a chyron that cited Trump’s 87 percent approval rating among Republicans. He did better at *The Bulwark*, the website founded as a haven for Never-Trump conservatives after the *Weekly Standard*’s demise. “If Donald Trump is an American patriot, he should resign from office,” Weld wrote in a *Bulwark* op-ed last week. “The Mueller report revealed that Trump is a one-man crime wave.”

It’s hard to know whether he’s making any headway. In late April, former senator Bob Corker, an avowed Republican foe of the president, mused about the value of a primary challenge for Trump.

“You could look at it and say that it would be a good thing for our country should that occur,” Corker said in an interview at the TIME 100 Summit in New York. “If you had a real primary, where you had someone that was really being listened to, and of substance, things that we were talking about — and I could go through a list of them — they would actually be debated in a real way.”

Of course, Weld, unquestionably a man of substance, had been in the race for eight days already. But Corker never mentioned him. It’s unclear what kind of candidate Corker is looking for, but clearly some natural allies in the party aren’t all that enthused by Weld.

For the moment, though—as would-be candidates such as Larry Hogan, John Kasich, and even Corker keep their options open and wait for Trump’s poll numbers to dip even lower—Weld is the only option. Unlike the jam-packed Democratic side, Weld has the microphone to himself to make his case to the disaffected members of the GOP and outraged independents.

The question is: Are they listening?

There were 70 people at the town hall event at New England College in Henniker, N.H., a kind of split-screen crowd of senior citizens and college students. One of the older members of the crowd lobbed the first gotcha question, which foreign leaders Weld admires. It was a sly repeat of a softball from Chris Matthews that Gary Johnson, Weld’s 2016 Libertarian ticket partner, totally fanned on.

But Weld was ready. He praised Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron. And he wasn’t done. He name-dropped Singaporean ex-diplomat Kishore Mahbubani. (You can look him up.) Then, for extra credit, Weld mentioned that he keeps in touch with former Irish leader Bertie Ahern,

making sure to correctly pronounce *taoiseach*, the Irish word for prime minister (it's *tee-shock*, by the way).

This was Weld's opening to pivot to an attack on Trump for being attracted to "the autocrats and the despots" like Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un. "The president, early on, said, 'Hey, what a tough kid! He is a tough kid! Imagine, he iced his own uncle!'" Weld complains. "This is in tones of admiration! I used to hear a lot of that when I was listening to wiretaps of the organized crime families we took out in Boston."

Trump brings out the prosecutor in Weld, who wants to build his campaign on rule of law, abroad and at home. From 1981 to 1986, as the U.S. Attorney for Massachusetts, he secured convictions of mob leaders and 85 public corruption defendants, including 19 Boston city employees. Bob Mueller, he told the Henneker audience, was his top deputy. (Touting this kind of connection is going to impress a fairly narrow band of Republican voters.) Weld became chief of the Justice Department's criminal division, but he resigned in 1988 over his concerns about Attorney General Edwin Meese's ethics problems and sharply criticized Meese in Senate testimony. (Again, denouncing Ronald Reagan's top law enforcement official is not how you endear yourself to the GOP mainstream.)

"We want a government of laws and not of men," Weld said on MSNBC on April 19, the day after Mueller's full report was released.. "Donald Trump wants a government of caprice and a cult of personality, and everyone responding to him, and loyal to him, and not to the law. That is criminal conduct and it is impeachable conduct."

Weld is a student of impeachment. A staffer on the House's 1974 Nixon impeachment inquiry, he contributed to the Judiciary Committee report on constitutional grounds for impeaching the president. (Weld and fellow staffer Hillary Clinton spent a weekend at the Library of Congress, assigned to hunt for impeachment law precedent.) For the record, he doesn't think the House should impeach Trump; impeachment is a political remedy, he notes, and the Republican Senate wouldn't convict him. Instead, Weld wants to prosecute an abuse-of-power case against Trump at the ballot box.

"Trying to get the Justice Department to be loyal to him personally, that's inconsistent with the rule of law," Weld says during his Manchester interview with POLITICO Magazine. "It's inconsistent with our scheme of justice."

Weld also intends to challenge Trump's immigration policy, despite Republican voters' strong support for it. "A policy or campaign based on anti-immigrant spleen and fervor is not a noble campaign," he says. To make the case, Weld hearkens back to 1854, when the Whig Party broke up and ex-Whigs split between the new Republican Party and the anti-immigrant Know-Nothing Party. The Know-Nothings "had violent rallies and they were given to conspiracy theories," Weld says. "They're the lineal forebearer of the Trump movement. And they disappeared. And the other half of the party—the Mitt Romney and Jeb Bush half, if you will—nominated Abraham Lincoln and got him elected four years later."

Somehow this comparison manages to be both historically accurate and politically suicidal. Comparing Lincoln to Jeb Bush, who finished out 2016 at home, bingeing on ESPN, is not a play for the average Republican primary voter.

But this is precisely the point about Weld's strategy. He's not aiming to win over regular Republican primary voters, despite what his party affiliation might indicate. "I've always done better with Independents than I did with Republicans," he says. Independents, he notes, make up about 40 percent of New Hampshire voters and can choose a Republican ballot in the state's open primary. Weld also aims to enlarge the electorate by appealing to millennials and Gen-Xers with his willingness to fight climate change. "Millennials are not about to buy the argument that climate change and global warming is a hoax," he says.

If this sounds pretty much like Weld circa 2016, well, that's not an accident. He hasn't quite gone back on his pledge at the 2016 Libertarian national convention: "I'm a Libertarian for life." Now, he's leading his libertarian revolt from inside a major party, Bernie Sanders-style. He's still pro-choice and pro-gay-rights, still for small government, tolerance, and defiance of authoritarian nationalism. He's also surprisingly reluctant to make a case for why Republicans should vote against Trump. "You mean someone who thinks climate change is a hoax?" he responds. "Do you define Republican to mean that?"

What about Republicans who like Trump's record on tax cuts and nominating conservative judges? Weld says he supports the 2017 tax overhaul, but thinks Trump should have vetoed some spending bills. "I cut taxes 21 times in Massachusetts," he says. After taking over as governor from Democrat Michael Dukakis in 1991, Weld cut the state budget, winning praise from the *Wall Street Journal* and the libertarian Cato Institute. "I don't think anyone is to my right or more enthusiastic about tax cuts."

Weld calls Supreme Court justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh "well-qualified." Though he found Christine Blasey Ford's testimony alleging a teenage assault by Kavanaugh "very troubling" and "very credible," it didn't change his opinion that Kavanaugh was a good choice for the court. "He was 17 years old," Weld says. "And we're not talking about rape here. That doesn't mean it's a day at the beach and I'm all for it." He

But if he's essentially conceding Trump's biggest achievements—tax cuts and Supreme Court nominees—why, I asked, should Republicans abandon the president who brought them their dearest wishes? "He's not an economic conservative," Weld says. "He's not stable in foreign policy. He seems to be trying to expand Russia's sphere of influence at the expense of our own. He seems to be promoting autocrats' actions." At home, "he has mocked the rule of law in the context of the Justice Department," Weld continues. "I'm someone who spent seven years trying to keep the politics out of law enforcement. And I'm not amused when someone tries to put politics back in."

Incumbent presidents wounded by strong primary challengers usually drop out or lose in November, Weld likes to note. Pat Buchanan against George H.W. Bush in 1992, Ted Kennedy versus Jimmy Carter in 1980, and Eugene McCarthy against Lyndon Johnson in 1968. Their strong second-place finishes in New Hampshire arguably changed history.

If he can beat Trump in New Hampshire, Weld says, he can set off an "electrical effect" and win primaries across the country. He has a plan to challenge Trump in states outside the South, including California, the Rust Belt and mid-Atlantic states. On top of independents, he'll be

looking for younger Republicans and suburban women, the kind of voters who helped deliver a bunch of Republican districts to Democrats in November.

Is that a coalition that can take out a sitting president, even one with a historically low approval rating?

“It’s going to be an uphill climb, simply because most of the energy’s going to be on the Democratic side,” says Josh Putnam, a lecturer at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington, whose *FrontloadingHQ* blog tracks presidential primaries. “To the extent independents are out there, they may be more inclined to participate in the Democratic process. That’s probably true for millennials as well.” When Democrat Bill Bradley bet on winning over New Hampshire independents in 2000, says Putnam, they voted for John McCain in the Republican primary instead.

The primary calendar is stacked against Weld, Putnam says. After New Hampshire, the nomination battle shifts mostly to open primaries in the South, where Trump is strongest. California votes early, on March 3, but its Republican primary is closed to independents. Meanwhile, GOP leaders are maneuvering to make a challenge to Trump more difficult. In South Carolina, Republicans have discussed replacing its February open primary with a caucus. “They’ve been pretty open about the fact that their main objective is to reelect the president,” Putnam says.

How big is the audience for a primary challenge to Trump? Polls offer two contradictory answers. They generally put Trump’s approval rating among Republicans above 80 percent. But an ABC News/Washington Post poll found that almost a third of conservatives and one in six Republicans won’t vote to re-elect him. And other polls show about 40 percent of Republican voters would like to see someone challenge Trump in the primaries.

But can Weld win them over? A new *Boston Globe*/Suffolk University poll, released two weeks after Weld launched his candidacy, found Trump beating him 72 percent to 17 percent.

“I think a lot of people would like to see somebody take on Trump in the Republican primaries,” says Kamarck of the Brookings Institution. “The problem is, [it] really has to be somebody with impeccable conservative credentials.” That’s not Weld, she says. “The real opportunity would be if somebody could take the evangelical base away from Trump.” But only a religious conservative could do that, she says—“If there was a Mike Pence out there who wasn’t in the administration.”

Never-Trump Republicans, the obvious audience for a Republican challenger, are divided on Weld’s candidacy.

“I was impressed by how energetic his critique of the president was,” says Charlie Sykes, editor-in-chief of *The Bulwark* and a former host on conservative talk radio, who interviewed Weld on the website’s podcast in April. Sykes thinks the Mueller report’s portrait of a “reckless and chronically dishonest” president gives Weld “a very powerful rationale to say to other Republicans, ‘Look, you can support some of these policies, but do you really want to run under Donald Trump’s banner again? And what would a second Trump term look like?’”

Still, Sykes calls Weld a long shot, vulnerable to Republican criticism of his Libertarian candidacy and Obama endorsement. “I’m guessing Bill Weld would not have been the first

choice of most Never-Trump conservatives,” he says. “A lot of us would be more comfortable with a Larry Hogan.”

Nichols, the author of *The Death of Expertise*, says the anti-elite populism his book describes has taken over the Republican Party. “Weld is a perfectly credible candidate for president,” Nichols says: a mid-sized-state governor with long experience in the Justice Department. “But in some ways, that actually counts against you now in Republican politics. The problem with Bill Weld and other résumé Republicans is that the résumé, in the eyes of Trump voters, disqualifies them.”

But Sarah Longwell, executive director of the anti-Trump conservative group Defending Democracy Together, says Weld is outperforming people’s expectations with his frequent appearances on cable TV, “articulating a conservative reason why Donald Trump isn’t a good standard-bearer for the party.” Weld fits Longwell’s sense of an ideal Trump primary challenger. “It probably comes down to somebody who can say, ‘Look, you would get the same policies with me, you’d get the judges and tax cuts, and you’d get it without such a high level of anxiety, without all the controversy, tweeting, and exhaustion,’” she says.

Criticism that Weld is challenging Trump from the left misses the point, she argues, because Trump doesn’t chart on a left-right spectrum. “You come at him as a character candidate versus a chaos candidate,” she says.

Weld hasn’t released campaign finance results yet, but Longwell thinks some anti-Trump conservative donors are ready to contribute to him, while others may later. “There are two categories: anti-Trump Republican donors who will absolutely help Bill Weld, and another category of donors that, if somebody got traction, would be there as well.”

Weld’s lonely challenge to Trump may get less lonely by year’s end. Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, speaking in New Hampshire last week, said he’s considering a primary challenge to Trump but sees no rush, with the filing deadline in November. Former Ohio Governor John Kasich, who came in second to Trump in the 2016 New Hampshire GOP primary, hasn’t ruled out a run. Nor has Corker, who told a Harvard Kennedy School audience this week that he’s in no rush to decide. Weld, perhaps surprisingly, is eager for some competition. He says he’s invited Hogan and Kasich to join him in the race.