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Little-known DC think tank becomes brain trust of 'Never Trumpism'

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Niskanen Center, a little-known Washington think tank, is positioning itself as an intellectual home for Republicans opposed to President Trump and unhappy with the rise of nationalism in the party.

Founded four years ago by alumni of the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank, Niskanen initially set out to forge a modern conservatism. The group's architects believed Republican ideology had grown stale, and they sought to build a think tank that would both challenge the dominant Reagan orthodoxy and address issues that the party often ignores — like climate change. That hasn't changed.

But with the rise of Trump, a populist who championed a form of nationalism that riled some conservatives, Niskanen — named for the late economist and longtime CATO chairman William Niskanen — became a headquarters for “Never Trump” Republicans. In an interview Thursday, Niskanen Center president Jerry Taylor embraced that reputation.

“We're rather concerned about the path the Republican Party is on today,” Taylor told the *Washington Examiner*. “It seems to be marching further into blood and soil nationalism.”

A recent Niskanen Center conference featuring Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan raised the think tank's profile.

Hogan, a centrist Republican, was easily re-elected last year in an overwhelmingly blue state, even as Republicans across the country were defeated in an anti-Trump backlash. The governor has lately been critical of the president's leadership and expressed interest in challenging him in the party's 2020 White House primary.

Taylor, noting that Niskanen's ability to be politically active is legally limited by its tax designation with the Internal Revenue Service, said the think tank had no plans to recruit Hogan or any other Republican to challenge Trump in 2020. He said the Hogan conference was a one-off, and not part of a planned series with other anti-Trump Republicans who might run against the president.

But Taylor said Niskanen wants to serve as an intellectual warehouse for Republicans interested in sidelining Trump. That's because, in his view, there is no supplanting the president and populism he has given rise to, absent a compelling agenda. In 2016, Trump won the Republican

nomination partly because he addressed the priorities of blue-collar and middle-class voters better than his opponents did.

“We’ve been working hard to offer some ideas about what a healthy alternative could look like after Trump leaves the scene — if Trump leaves the scene,” Taylor said.