



## A place for the GOP to mull life after Trump

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Jerry Taylor, a former climate-change skeptic, was chatting recently about the future of the Republican Party when he sat up in his chair inside the sixth-floor offices of the center-right think tank he runs and extended his hand to two portraits flanking him, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, two giants of the Republican Party. “Our ideas are not so alien to the GOP,” he insisted.

Perhaps, but the ideas that he and his think tank, the Niskanen Center, are promoting — which they describe as the “free-market welfare state” — are still having a hard time finding a home in the party of Donald Trump.

It is a dark time for those who consider themselves either “Never Trumpers” or moderates. “That community now has been blown apart,” admitted Taylor, who assesses the prospects for the modern Republican Party thusly: “Right off a cliff and into a pile of radioactive rubble.”

Despite scandal and chaos and incompetence engulfing the White House, the president has nevertheless tightened his grip on the party by merging his campaign with the national party while actively working to thwart a challenger.

In a recent Gallup poll, Trump had an 89 percent approval rating among Republicans — a daunting number for anyone brave enough to cross him. In February, Liz Mair, a Republican strategist, all but wrote the movement’s obituary in a New York Times op-ed, comparing their prospects to the extinct West African black rhino.

“If we’re trying to create a new movement on the right, then the analog right now is sort of 1954-1955, when National Review was founded,” said Brink Lindsey, vice president for policy at Niskanen, referring to the magazine and movement spearheaded by William F. Buckley Jr. That movement fused free-marketers with religious conservatives and culminated in the nomination of Barry Goldwater as president in 1964, and it remains to this day the organizing principle of the Republican Party. “On the politics side, I would say we’re in extremely early days and we are in the ideas stage,” Lindsey said.

In December, Larry Hogan, the popular Republican governor of Maryland, traveled to Washington to appear at a conference sponsored by Niskanen. The title of that conference was “Starting Over: The Center-Right After Trump,” and was essentially a confab for bummed-out conservatives who are still, more than two years later, seeking relevance after Trump took a wrecking ball to their world.

Hogan gave a talk that was light on policy specifics but nevertheless raised eyebrows for its clear rebuke of the president amid calls for bipartisanship. Afterward, talk began to bubble that Hogan

was mulling a primary challenge to Trump and the think tank was recruiting him to do so — a notion neither dispelled.

Taylor said he wants him to run with “every fiber of my being.” He sees in the governor a vessel for some of his big ideas: a carbon tax to fight climate change, liberalizing immigration policies, a better safety net to address the widening gulf between the haves and have-nots.

In December, the center posted a manifesto that called for a movement that “combines the best aspects of the ‘pro-market’ right and the ‘pro-government’ left.”

Hitching their wagon to a Hogan candidacy would be an obvious boon for a think tank that is a financial guppy compared to other Washington shops, according to its most recent IRS filings.

There are those who question whether such a project is worthwhile. Oren Cass, a Manhattan Institute scholar, put it this way: “How does the Niskanen Center’s new ‘policy vision’ differ from the Obama administration’s?” Others countered that what was being offered was coming from the right wing of the Democratic Party, not anywhere hospitable on the right.

Taylor is typical of many in the movement. He came up through right-leaning free-market organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council, the influential group that drafts model legislation for state legislators. He made his living for more than two decades as a climate-science skeptic at the Cato Institute, the libertarian powerhouse controlled by the Koch brothers. From that perch he argued that the economic impacts of addressing climate change were too great and that the science was unsettled, positions he has now reversed himself completely on.

Following a protracted internal war within Cato, Taylor and a group of acolytes left the institute and founded the Niskanen Center, named for William Niskanen, a top economic aide to Ronald Reagan and later, the longtime chairman of Cato who, like Taylor, had a penchant for speaking bluntly. (Notably, Niskanen was fired from Ford Motor Co. and made impolitic comments as a member of the Reagan administration.) He died in 2011.

What led them to this new path was research by some of their scholars, who found that in certain countries like Denmark, Sweden and Canada, the free market and generous government benefits could coexist peacefully. It worked in those countries, they argued, because a large welfare state providing for their populations was coupled with a generally less-restrictive regulatory environment.

The Niskanen Center (pronounced “nis-CANNON”) is hardly a heavyweight financially. In 2017, it reported revenue totaling \$3.5 million, tiny compared to idea factories like Heritage (\$82.1 million) and Cato (\$36.7 million). It is often described as libertarian, though the center eschews that label. Taylor considers himself a Republican. Geoffrey Kabaservice, the director of political studies, is a registered Republican.

The center has notched some successes recently. In February, in a step that caught the attention of many on the left and right, Republicans on the House Science, Space and Technology Committee invited a respected Niskanen scholar, Joseph Majkut, to testify before the panel. In its previous eight years under Republican control, the committee had been a hotbed for the airing of climate-change skepticism. At the website for the right-leaning Competitive Enterprise Institute, Myron Ebell, a prominent climate-change skeptic, wrote that Majkut’s appearance was one of

many “strong signals” that Republicans “will concede the scientific case for global warming alarmism.”

In 2018, the group teamed with Rep. Carlos Curbelo of Florida to introduce a carbon tax bill, the first such piece of legislation offered by a Republican in over a decade. “They were a partner throughout the whole process,” he said, “and we would share ideas with them and they would run analyses and different models and just help us in the process of crafting the legislation.”

Curbelo was one example of the since-abandoned plans at Niskanen: working with moderate Republicans in Congress to advance legislation during Hillary Clinton’s expected presidency.

That scenario never transpired and the 2018 election saw Curbelo and dozens of moderate Republicans leave Congress, either through retirement or defeat at the ballot box. Curbelo speaks bitterly of having lost a home in the current two-party system as he mulls a run for mayor of Miami-Dade County. “It’s a time of political crisis in our country. And sadly, I don’t see that changing anytime soon.”

A host of moderate thinkers have taken notice of the center. David Brooks, the New York Times columnist, called the center “one of the most creative think tanks in America today.” He opened a conference Niskanen sponsored Feb. 25 that called for “Reviving Moderation,” appealing for togetherness and comity. John W. Lettieri, who heads the bipartisan Economic Innovation Group, said of the center: “Few groups are as consistently interesting and provocative . . . these days.”

A party debates

What is happening at Niskanen is part of a wider conversation that has been taking place in the Republican Party: What will happen to it once Trump exits the scene? Will it go back to its pre-Trump 2012 incarnation? Will it steal some of his ideas about economic populism?

“It’s currently Trump’s party and will be as long as he’s president,” said Alex Conant, a Republican consultant who served as an aide for GOP Sen. Marco Rubio’s run for president in 2016 (and is quick to point out he is not a Never Trumper). “And as the leader of the party he’s shaping what the party stands for, but he’s not going to be president forever, and if you look at the next generation of Republican leaders, people who are likely to be our nominee in 2024 and 2028, they generally represent a more classical version of conservatism.” He’s thinking of people like former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley, Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton and, of course, Rubio, who don’t necessarily consider themselves trade protectionists and are more “open-minded about immigration.”

Others disagree. Kabaservice, the author of “Rule and Ruin,” a book about the disappearance of moderates from the party, believes that what Trump has wrought is here to stay. “It’s impossible at this point to pretend that we’ll ever go back to the kind of conservatism that prevailed pre-Trump,” he said. His argument, like many on the center-right, is that the Trump campaign promising economic populism on trade and the divide between the haves and have-nots was brilliant, but his delivery has been nonexistent. “He hasn’t done much for the people who voted for him, except to give them cultural warfare grievance mongering.”

The other question is whether the ideas from Niskanen and others on the center-right will gain any purchase. It’s not so far-fetched as you might think. Hans Noel, a political scientist at

Georgetown University, has studied the impact of elite activism on the direction of parties. When it comes to magazines like National Review and The Weekly Standard, he found they have played a largely unrecognized and outsized role in influencing the directions of parties. “It is activists and politically sophisticated people who get what they want,” he wrote in his book, “Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America.”

“They are not a secret cabal ruling the world,” he wrote, “but they do more than exercise undue influence. They shape the ideas that become the policies that parties fight over.”

As for the current environment, Noel said he could see a new movement being born on the wings of the Never Trumpers. “There are a lot of conservatives who are frustrated with Trump and would like to see an alternative,” he said. He doesn’t see them moving toward Democrats, who are lurching leftward at a rapid pace. “They say, ‘I can’t be part of that, what do I do?’ And so there is definitely potential cleavage, I think, within the Republican Party between these two brands of conservatism.”

Others are skeptical that much can be done from the top down. Chris Baylor, a lecturer at UCLA and the author of “First to the Party,” a study of how ideological movements transform parties, said moderates like Hogan simply don’t have the numbers. “So far they haven’t built up a large movement around that. The organized interests on the right of the GOP are far more powerful. These things don’t grow overnight.”

Still, he thinks there may be some chance for moderates. “The more Trump goes down in flames, the more opportunity they have,” he said. If Republicans recognize the country is becoming a majority-minority country, he said, that could move them. “They’ll be more likely to do things that give voice to that faction of the party, even though they’re not that popular, and not that organized.” In that scenario, he could foresee someone like Haley as a potential 2024 candidate.

Frances Lee, a scholar at the University of Maryland, is less optimistic. She recently appeared at a Niskanen-sponsored conference and delivered the bleak news: Unless there’s some cataclysm in the near future like an economic depression or war that completely discredits the other party, then the continued fighting between the two extremes — and the lack of bipartisan cooperation that goes along with it — will probably continue.

“It’s going to continue to be trench warfare,” she said.