

Leaving the CIRCUS TENT

Some Oregon Republicans don't see President Donald Trump as the right leader for U.S., or their party

BY HENRY HOUSTON

Back in 2016, then-presumptive candidate Donald Trump walked up to the podium at Lane Events Center as 2 Unlimited's "Get Ready for This" played. For about an hour, his yelled stump speech distorted the PA system in front of a crowd of about 4,300 supporters that was shoulder-to-shoulder for roughly one-third of the floor space.

He hit all of the "greatest hits" of his campaign, like asking who's going to pay for his wall, having the crowd boo the media and throwing out a protester who raised a Mexican flag — and looking away as his supporters threw punches at the protester.

At the end of his rally, after repeatedly pronouncing Oregon as "Ore-gone," he said "winning" was on the country's horizon if he was elected.

"You're going to see things happen, and we're going to start winning again. We're going to win, win, win," he said in 2016. "And you're going to beg me, 'Mr. President, we're winning too much, and we can't stand it in Eugene, Oregon.' And I'm going to say, 'I don't care. We're going to keep winning.'"

That was the 2016 election year. Now in 2020 some Oregon Republicans — some who are now former Oregon Republicans — are begging him that they can't stand his "winning" anymore. More than five months into a pandemic and more than two months into a historic civil rights movement, they are stepping away from Trump's Republican Party.

The party's defectors include Jonathan Lockwood, an over-the-top former Oregon Senate Republican spokesperson who says he couldn't take Trump's lack of leadership after years of broken promises and a neo-fascist response to Black Lives Matter-related protesters.

But Lockwood isn't the first Republican to abandon the Trump train. Trump has been a topic of the Oregon House floor debate from a Republican who serves a swing district and recently doubled down on his inability to lead during a pandemic and the U.S.'s recent civil rights movement.

While some conservatives say the U.S. works well with two healthy political parties that lean left and right and meet in the middle for policy, others are looking for change.

Trump's Republican Party is just another evolution of the political party, according to Rich Vial, a former Oregon legislator and someone who left the Republican Party while running for secretary of state in 2020. He says the issue is the two-party system, which embraces fringe candidates during the primary election.

Trump's Circus Tent

Lockwood is no stranger to the Democratic Party of Oregon. The political party put together an attack memo on the former Oregon Senate Republican spokesperson and strategist titled "Republican Mouthpiece, Fear Mongering Twitter Bully." The report was distributed when

he left his communications position with the Oregon Senate Republicans to briefly run public relations for Republican Knute Buehler's unsuccessful 2018 gubernatorial campaign.

The memo has a photo of Lockwood wearing a tank top with "Stop Being Poor" written on it, which former reality star and hotel heiress Paris Hilton once infamously wore, striking a pose very similar to her with his arms stretched out.

Lockwood tells *Eugene Weekly* that he's been cast as a right-wing villain, but if you look at the issues, he's not right wing; he's aggressive. He adds that beating on Democrats when they deserve it isn't "right wing."

He says he supported Trump in 2016 because he was the guy who could beat Hillary Clinton. And Lockwood thought Trump would actually tackle issues like the student loan crisis. But that was campaign-trail Trump speaking. The White House version is unfit for the presidency, he says.

What finally pushed Lockwood away from Trump's Republican Party was when his administration decided to use tear gas for a photo op earlier this summer at St. John's Church near the White House. But Trump did even more damage. He decided to have his rally in Tulsa — the site of a 1921 racist massacre — on Juneteenth, killed student loan reform and rolled back health care protections for transgender patients during Pride month.

And while Trump said Joe Biden would be soft on China, Lockwood says Trump has ignored Uighur Muslims being sent to concentration camps. So Lockwood had enough.

Trump's Republican Party isn't the party that Lockwood signed up for. He says the party has long seen itself as the "big tent" party. It's a party that welcomes fiscal conservatives, the religious right, foreign policy hawks — and a lot more.

"Now under Trump, we have a circus tent," he says.

The party Trump leads is forcing the U.S. into a borderline neo-fascist state where racism prevails, he says. When *EW* talked with Lockwood, Trump had just retweeted a video from a Florida Trump rally, which begins with an old white man in a golf cart yelling "white power" to protesters holding up Biden posters.

"It was so alarming to me," Lockwood says. "I've worked with so many campaigns. In no operation that I've ever seen do you Tweet at a whim."

Trump's "Did I do that?" shrugging off the Tweet was like Steve Urkel from *Family Matters*, Lockwood says, but Trump has to know what he's doing, adding that Trump doesn't actually have a philosophy. It changes day-to-day on Twitter and is basically a stream of consciousness from an unwell man.

"When he goes away, so will those people, because there isn't room for that kind of politics," he says.

The party's unspoken rule about not criticizing the president is frustrating, Lockwood says. Back in the early 2010s with the Tea Party, he says, it was a mark of principle

and strength to take down leaders and call them out when they went against conservative ideals.

When he spoke out about Trump, Lockwood says, he heard positive responses from some politicians — although some people on the internet wondered if he'd been bought out by George Soros or if the Illuminati finally got him.

He says his change of heart shouldn't have been news to anyone. When President George W. Bush and First Lady Michelle Obama posed for photos together, he had posted online that the country needed more of those across-the-aisle moments.

He says a lot of Republicans are in the same position as he was — but many are afraid of retaliation for saying they don't like Trump. Since Trumpism has injected an element of cultism to the party, Trump supporters lash out at Republicans who criticize the president. He adds that it's ironic because Trump supporters are the "Republicans in name only," aka RINOs since they put Trump above the party.

Lockwood says he's still considering what action to take to get rid of Trump, but he won't stay on the sidelines as the 2020 election continues to boil. He has a vision of the Republican Party that doesn't have its current white demographics.

"Ideally, I'd like to see the Republican Party become the party of the young people and minorities," he says about making individual rights attractive to new voters and activists.

He adds that he thinks that people will begin to leave the Republican Party's "big tent," so it's possible change could come. And he wants to work for that change.

Not Bending to Trump

A week after the killing of George Floyd, Republican state Rep. Cheri Helt of Bend went to Facebook to post that Trump had failed the test of presidential leadership.

"When America was confronted with the global pandemic, the President's response was bad — but his rhetoric and actions since the killing of George Floyd are even worse," she wrote on the June 4 post. "In November, America needs to elect a new President who can lead our nation in a more positive direction. Given what's at stake I feel I must speak out against the President who happens to share my Party registration but does not share my moral compass values."

The post's comments illustrated just how divided Republicans are over Trump.

Some said Helt exhibited qualities of Oregon's Republican governors — Tom McCall, Mark Hatfield and Victor Atiyeh. Others used some of Trump's "greatest hits" of insults: calling her a snowflake, accusing her of pandering to the left and describing her as a "rhino."

Helt wasn't breaking any news about her opposition to Trump — she's been open about not voting for him in 2016