

SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

# The Republicans' Big Hot Mess

Frank Bruni | JUNE 18, 2016

IN normal times, a party's leaders and comers grovel for roles in the convention and prime time on its stage.

In the Year of Trump, Republicans are racing for the exits. It's as if the Emerald City suddenly turned into Chernobyl. The list of luminaries who plan to skip Donald Trump's coronation in Cleveland includes the 2012 nominee (Mitt Romney), the 2008 nominee (John McCain) and the two-term president who preceded them, George W. Bush. The Bushes en masse are taking a pass.

Small wonder that one of Trump's advisers recently suggested that the candidate not wait until the climactic hour to deliver his remarks but, in a break with precedent, speak *every single night*. Not just double Donald. No mere triple Trump. Four luscious scoops of him.

It's an idea where narcissism meets necessity. And it's reason to take that trip to the Arctic Circle that you've long fantasized about. Make sure that you're beyond the range of the internet, and think about staying through Nov. 8.

Convention planners may wind up recruiting famous figures from outside of politics to fill the void. Trump raised that prospect two weeks ago, but to mortifying ends. He said that he wanted a lineup of "winners" like his buddy Ben Roethlisberger, the Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback, who has been accused repeatedly of sexual assault. Roethlisberger promptly told a reporter that he had not endorsed Trump, barely knew him and would not be in Cleveland. Perhaps Trump should aim lower and hit up an offensive lineman with an even more offensive past.

What a total, utter freak show this promises to be, and not in the manner that Republicans feared just months ago. They wondered then if the convention would be contested, with Trump and Ted Cruz dueling for delegates. Now they're looking at four excruciating days that will be light on appropriate speakers, short on cash and long on God-knows-what other than the music of Trump's voice and the shimmer of Trump's hair.

He's in a bind. He has expressed the desire for an event incorporating more show business than usual (shocker!), but bling doesn't come cheap, and neither corporate sponsors nor individual donors are coming around in their usual numbers to contribute.

Will Tightwad Trump foot the bill himself? That's hard to envision, given how many vendors he's stiffed over time. And how loath he is to paying taxes. And how grudgingly he's been known to follow through on a charitable donation. And how exultant he's been about not pumping huge sums into his campaign.

The pall over Cleveland reflects an animosity between him and other Republicans that's only getting worse. There's no way to overstate how extraordinary all of this is.

Over the last two weeks, the Trump campaign's feuding with the Republican National Committee intensified. The number of Republican senators and governors who have said they are not yet ready to endorse him — or won't ever do so — continued to grow.

Over the last several days, Politico published a story noting that Trump's vice-presidential finalists may come down to the puny band of miscreants who can bear to say yes. And Sam Clovis, a co-chairman of the Trump

campaign, grumbled that all those Republicans who can't get fully behind Trump should "just shut the hell up."

Perhaps Clovis was miffed because Paul Ryan, who *has* gotten behind Trump, felt compelled to publicly rebuke him yet again.

This is the cringe-inducing "Groundhog Day" of Ryan's script: You're a racist, Donald! But you're my racist. Bad Donald for that Muslim ban! But you're good enough for me.

Ryan's fans in the party are dying. His political future may be, too. He's not so much behind Trump as under him, and he's being crushed.

His counterpart in the Senate, Mitch McConnell, also supports Trump and also looks as if he's about to throw up whenever the billionaire's name is mentioned. He tries to sidestep the topic, a practice so prevalent on Capitol Hill that my Times colleague Jennifer Steinhauer last week produced a **taxonomy of Trump avoiders**, under the headline: "The 5 Types of Trump-Averse Republicans."

I'm told that McConnell is freaking out about the newest voter surveys, like one by Bloomberg Politics that showed Hillary Clinton with a 12-point lead and another by ABC News and The Washington Post that put Trump's unfavorable rating at 70 percent. McConnell sees his Senate majority slipping away.

"Trump's stomach-churning behavior would be manageable if his poll numbers were holding up," said one disgusted Republican strategist who doesn't support Trump and was mocking the thinking of Republicans who do. "But there's a perfect correlation between tolerance for misbehavior and poll numbers."

SEVERAL party insiders told me that if Trump continued to behave as outrageously as he did when attacking the judge in the Trump University case and implying that President Obama sympathized with terrorists, there could yet be stratagems to deny him the nomination in Cleveland. Trump-opposed delegates have been **organizing and agitating**.

"People are stirring," one strategist told me. And another: "It feels like the wheels are coming off the bus."

I'm skeptical. The wheels are always coming off the Trump bus, but he has multiple planes and a helicopter to boot. He stays aloft.

What I'm sure of is a convention like none before it. Many of the sorts of congressional staffers who are typically eager to pitch in will travel to Cleveland only at the insistence of their bosses and under duress. "It is going to resemble a funeral for a relative everyone hates," one Capitol Hill veteran told me.

At the last few G.O.P. conventions, the effort to put minority candidates and office holders onstage was so vigorous that it became a running joke, but how many blacks and Hispanics will be willing to buttress Trump?

He said that he'd like to have the New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady give remarks. About Deflategate? Gisele?

What *will* the talking points be? Even many Republicans who have dutifully fallen in line take issue with much of what Trump pronounces and proposes. So I suppose they stand sheepishly at the microphone and rant without interruption about the evils of the Clintons. Do politics-soured swing voters really crave hour upon hour of that?

I'm overlooking some eager Trump cheerleaders. My bad. Newt Gingrich is on board, and boy can he talk ... and talk ... and talk. Chris Christie is at the ready, with a hunger for attention that's not quickly sated. So maybe we get several scoops of each of them, with an omnipresent topping of Trump.

What a sundae. Could put me off dairy into the next millennium.

I invite you to follow me on Twitter (@FrankBruni) and join me on Facebook.

*Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.*

