

Starting Over: The Center-Right After Trump **A Niskanen Center Conference on December 11, 2018**

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS FROM JERRY TAYLOR

Good morning. I'd like to welcome you to our conference *Starting Over: The Center-Right after Trump*. My name is Jerry Taylor and I'm the president and co-founder of the Niskanen Center. We organized this conference because we feel that a healthy center-right is critical for American democracy, and that the right is not presently in a very healthy place. What until recently was an ideologically diverse coalition of business-oriented economic conservatives, neo-conservatives, social conservatives, reform conservatives, and libertarians has transformed into an angry, anti-intellectual ethno-nationalist movement that embraces a closed and more fearful society.

Those of us uncomfortable with the path being blazed by the right over the past few years have our work cut out for us. If we are to wage a battle for the hearts and minds of the center-right, we must offer something compelling in its place. What should that be? Is our aim to simply turn the clock back to 2014, before the Tea Party movement aligned with Trumpism? To return to a more responsible, fusionist conservatism as once defined by Barry Goldwater, Bill Buckley, and Ronald Reagan? Or is our aim to give flesh and bones to the stillborn "reform conservatism" promoted by some of the speakers on our program today, who once derided the "zombie Reaganism" that characterized the GOP before Trump?

My own sense is that all of these alternatives to Trumpism faced a serious stress-test in 2016 and were found wanting. Hence, if the broken remnants of the various factions of Trump-skeptics on the center-right are to reemerge as a serious force in American politics, we will need to find common ground and give birth to something new. What that might be is what this conference is all about.

Some are inclined to think that the dysfunctions in the GOP — the political vehicle for the center-right — are so profound that there is little hope in working that soil. While I'm often tempted to agree, I don't think that small-l liberalism can long last in this country if one of the two major parties is dedicated to its dismantlement. Moreover, a healthy center-right is critical for a healthier center-left, something that also needs our attention. As John Stuart Mill once noted:

In politics ... it is almost a commonplace, that a party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life ... Each of these modes of thinking derives its utility from the deficiencies of the other; but it is in a great measure the opposition of the other that keeps each within the limits of reason and sanity.

And as we're all witnessing, the boundaries of reason and sanity in American politics are being increasingly tested.

It's fitting, therefore, that Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, who constantly polls as one of the nation's most popular governors, is here to kick off our discussion this morning. Governor Hogan is one of the few politicians in the GOP who has successfully forged a politically attractive alternative to Trumpist governance, and there is a lot that we can learn from him. Last month, Governor Hogan defeated Democrat Ben Jealous to become the first Republican governor to win re-election in that state since 1954, and only the second to do so in Maryland's

history. And this in a state where Democrats outnumber Republicans by a 2-1 margin. Indeed, Governor Hogan received the most votes of any gubernatorial candidate in Maryland state history, a remarkable feat in an election cycle in which Democrats flipped seven governorships, seven state legislative chambers, and more than 300 state legislative seats. He won 51% of the union vote, 50% of the woman's vote, 48% of the Latino vote, and even 28% of the African-American vote. He did so by promoting a moderate, bipartisan agenda of environmental protection, gun control, tax cuts, mass transit investment, and innovative education and workforce development initiatives.

As Matt Mosk noted last year in the *Washington Post*:

[Larry] Hogan has two powerful, though seemingly contradictory, things going for him. On the one hand, he was elected by the same category of voters who, from Pennsylvania to Ohio to Wisconsin, would later vault Trump to the White House: a potent wave of disaffected blue-collar and suburban whites. On the other hand, he has worked to create a personal brand that is affable, bipartisan and pragmatic — pretty much the opposite of Trump.

And he hasn't been shy to part company with the president and party orthodoxy when his conscience required. For instance, Governor Hogan was only one of two Republican governors who refused to send the Maryland National Guard to the U.S.-Mexico border until the policy of separating migrant children from their families is ended. And in the GOP today, that takes real courage.

Accordingly, we are extremely pleased to have him with us today. Please join me in welcoming Maryland Governor Larry Hogan.

MARYLAND GOVERNOR LARRY HOGAN'S WELCOMING ADDRESS

Good morning. Thank you, Jerry. It's an honor to be here with all of you this morning for this important conference at this significant time — not only for the Republican Party but for our nation.

Last week, I was honored to attend the funeral services for our 41st president, George H. W. Bush — a true American hero who represented the very best of America. He showed us the true meaning of public service... of honor, integrity, and strength of conviction... of humility, dignity, and grace.

In 1979, when asked if he was tough enough to be president, he said, "I don't equate toughness to just attacking some individual. I equate toughness with moral fiber, with character, with principle, with demonstrated leadership in tough jobs where you emerge not bullying somebody, but with the respect of the people you led."

President Bush is someone whom I have respected and admired my entire life. And as I listened to his son, our 43rd president, deliver a beautiful eulogy for his father, I could not help but think back to last year, when I lost my own dad and had the difficult job of delivering his eulogy.

My dad was honored to serve in Congress with President George H. W. Bush. He served on the House Judiciary Committee during Watergate as the whole world was watching the impeachment proceedings. Despite tremendous political pressure, he put aside partisanship and he made a tough decision.

During his impassioned testimony, he said, "Party loyalty and personal affection and precedents of the past must fall before the arbiter of men's actions: the law itself. No man, not even the

president of the United States, is above the law. For our system of justice and our system of government to survive, we must pledge our highest allegiance to the strength of the law and not to the common frailties of men.”

With those words, he became the first Republican to come out for the impeachment of President Richard Nixon. That decision cost him dearly. He lost many friends and supporters and his party’s nomination for governor that year.

But it was his defining moment, the one for which he is most remembered and most admired. And history has proven that his courageous stand was the right thing to do for our nation.

President George W. Bush and I were both lucky enough to learn a lot about integrity and public service from our fathers. But I chose to spend most of my life in the private sector, founding and growing several small businesses. This is the first elective office I’ve ever held. But I have tried my very best to follow those examples and to govern with integrity, civility, bipartisanship, and moderation.

I ran for governor in 2014 because I was completely fed up with politics as usual. And, quite frankly, I still am — in fact, perhaps now more than ever.

Four years ago, I became so concerned that I decided I needed to step up and try do something about it. Our efforts brought together Republicans, Democrats, and Independents with a unified message that resonated with the majority of Marylanders. And in one of the bluest states in the country, we pulled off the biggest surprise upset in America and I became just the second Republican governor elected in Maryland in fifty years.

And after four years of bipartisan success, last month — in our deep blue state, in a big blue year with a huge blue wave — we rode a purple surfboard to an overwhelming double-digit victory while our party was racking up losses across the country. In our state, which Hillary won by 29 points, I won more votes than any other previous Maryland governor and became the second Republican governor re-elected in the entire 242-year history of our state.

Four years ago, two-thirds of all Marylanders thought our state was way off track and heading in the wrong direction. But after all the progress we have made, now more than two-thirds of all the people in Maryland think we’re headed in the right direction. And an overwhelming majority of Marylanders, regardless of their party affiliation, approve of the job that we’re doing.

There are a lot of reasons for that success. But I’d like to share with you three core principles that have guided my administration.

First, fiscal responsibility and common sense. In the years just before I took office, forty-three consecutive tax hikes had taken an additional \$10 billion dollars out of the pockets of struggling Maryland families, retirees, and small businesses, and crushed our economy. Our overall economic performance ranked forty-ninth out of fifty states. We had lost 8,000 businesses and more than 100,000 jobs, and a Gallup poll showed that nearly half of all Marylanders wanted to leave the state.

As a lifelong Marylander, that broke my heart. I pledged to put Maryland on a new and better path. We submitted the first balanced budget in a decade, which eliminated the \$5.1 billion structural deficit we inherited. And we have continued to pass balanced budgets every single year. We eliminated 250 fees and 850 job-killing regulations. We cut taxes four years in a row

by \$1.2 billion, and we put all of that money back into the pockets of hardworking Marylanders, retirees, and small businesses, and back into our growing economy.

As a result, we had the best year for business in Maryland in more than a decade and the best year for job growth in more than fifteen years. We went from losing 100,000 jobs to gaining more than 120,000 jobs. More businesses have been opened and more people are working than at any other time in Maryland history. We have had one of the biggest economic turnarounds in America.

The second core principle has been moderation and bipartisan cooperation. I stood on the steps of our historic State House in Annapolis four years ago to deliver my inaugural address, long before the bitter and rancorous presidential race of 2016, and I said: “To those who would divide us, or drive us to the extremes of either political party, I remind you that Maryland has been called ‘a state of middle temperament.’” I said that “The politics that have divided our nation need not divide our state,” and I pledged to find that middle ground where we could all stand together.

I did not have a crystal ball to foresee just how divided our nation would become. It’s just that I have always believed that, even in politics, compromise and moderation shouldn’t be considered dirty words. I believe that it’s only when the partisan shouting stops that we can truly hear each other’s voices and concerns.

So as I took the oath of office, I promised to usher in a new “environment of trust and cooperation, where the best ideas rise to the top based upon their merit, regardless of which side of the political debate they come from.”

And for the past four years, we have succeeded by doing exactly what we said we would do, from growing our economy and putting people back to work... to delivering record funding for education... being a national leader on the environment... rebuilding our transportation infrastructure... and protecting the health care coverage of Marylanders while reducing health insurance rates for the first time in a decade.

In Maryland, we have risen above the fray of partisan politics and we have chosen to seek commonsense, bipartisan solutions to the serious problems that face us.

The third principle has been to lead with integrity and civility. We have successfully changed the tone of the debate in our state capital. We have stood up for the principles we believe in but have also taken the time to listen to the other side and to find compromise solutions. And we learned to disagree without being disagreeable.

It may seem hard to believe today, but I believe that Americans, in our hearts, are actually hard-wired for civility and cooperation. It’s who we are. It’s part of our identity. And it is one of our greatest strengths.

And a culture of tolerance and mutual respect should extend to those with whom we happen to disagree on politics. Just because someone may not agree with us on every issue, that should not mean that they are our enemies. And I believe that is what’s broken in America today — especially here in Washington, where nobody can find a way to work together and where nothing ever seems to get done.

Ladies and gentlemen, in Maryland we have chosen a completely different path. And we’re proud to be setting an example for the rest of the nation. Despite the wedge politics and petty

rhetoric which is often used today to cause division and to incite anger on both the right and the left, I still believe even today that in America what unites us is greater than that which divides us.

Last month, there was a piece in the *New York Times* which talked about what they called “the exhausted majority.” It found that two-thirds of all Americans do not align themselves with either the left or the right, but instead belong to what I call the majority in the middle. The piece said that at America’s heart is a vast and often overlooked political middle that feels forgotten in all of today’s political vitriol.

One guy the *Times* interviewed stood out for me. He said, “For the last two years it’s been impossible to go to a bar on a Monday night and not have to argue about politics. Most Americans are sick of that.” He said he thought someone could be elected in 2020 by promising that if they become president, people will be able to just go back to talking about football.

I think he was speaking for that “exhausted majority” of Americans in the middle who are sick and tired of all the angry and divisive politics on both sides. They just want their elected officials in both parties to stop the name-calling and the hyper-partisan politics, and to just work together — as we have done in Maryland — to achieve real, commonsense, bipartisan solutions to the nation’s problems.

Ladies and gentlemen, in spite of the divisiveness we see in Washington, I still remain hopeful about America’s future. And to those who say it’s too broken and can’t be fixed, I would argue that if we can do it — if we can solve problems with civility, bipartisanship, and common sense, and appeal to the vast majority of citizens in Maryland — then there is no place in America where these very same principles cannot succeed.

And I’m encouraged that people like all of you — people who understand that these core values are the most basic of American ideals and that the fight to restore them is a fight worth fighting — are having important conversations like the ones you will be having today.

Thank you for inviting me, and thank you all for caring enough to be involved in this important discussion about the future of America.