



The Final Days of Republicans Against Trump

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Republicans' Last, Doomed Fight Against Donald Trump

An eccentric band of conservatives thought they could make a last stand against the presumptive nominee, but wound up only strengthening Trump as he marches to the nomination next week.

Rick Wilking / Reuters

CLEVELAND—Here is how they imagined it would go down: On the floor of the Republican convention next week, when the states were called, one by one, to submit their presidential votes, the delegates would rise up.

“Objection!” a voice would shout, early in the alphabet—perhaps it would be Lori Hack, the Arizona delegate whose state GOP was trying to get her [disqualified](#) for announcing she wouldn’t support the presumptive nominee, Donald Trump. Or perhaps it would be someone else, one of a handful of other delegates who have [brought lawsuits](#), [spoken their minds](#), or been [threatened with sanctions](#) for refusing to support Trump.

The objectors would demand their renegade votes be counted rather than the official tallies their state leaders were reporting. (Under Arizona’s delegate-allocation rules, for example, Trump won all 58 of its delegates when he won the state’s March primary.) The convention chairman, House Speaker Paul Ryan, would recognize and count them.

And one by one, seeing the objectors’ boldness, delegates from other states would rise up, too, until Trump no longer had the 1,237-delegate majority he needed to get the nomination on the first convention ballot.

And then what would happen? They couldn’t say. But they were sure how it would end.

“I think it is probable that Donald Trump will not be the Republican nominee,” Eric O’Keefe, a Wisconsin conservative operative who co-founded Delegates Unbound, told me on Wednesday, sitting in a mostly bare, recently rented office suite on the 16th floor of a downtown Cleveland office building.

“There are a lot of delegates who don’t want to vote for Trump,” O’Keefe, a slender man with a mop of gray-white hair, told me evenly. “That’s why we’re here.”

The scenario sketched out by O’Keefe and his fellow Republican rebels—a ragtag band of misfits and gadflies, with competing agendas and no clear endgame—wasn’t just farfetched. It was a fantasy. And 36 hours later, it would fizzle in dramatic fashion, as the Republican National Committee and the Trump campaign teamed up to squelch it definitively, despite a Republican senator’s dramatic last-minute appeal to his fellow partisans’ conscience. By Friday morning, Trump would be publicly [gloating](#) about having “crushed” the delegate revolt, and the GOP’s submission to its conqueror would be complete.

The push to topple Trump, it turned out, was a paper tiger, a few loud but lonely voices who never stood much of a chance in a party temperamentally inclined not to rock the boat. (Some members of the media who had spent the week hyping the effort grumbled afterward about feeling burned by the rebels’ grandiose

and, it turned out, unsubstantiated claims.) Considering the powerful force of partisanship and the uncertain and unprecedented nature of their efforts, it's impressive they got as far as they did: an office, [flights of television ads](#), more than a dozen volunteers frantically strategizing and whipping delegate votes.

But as the effort went down in flames, it revealed a Republican Party that, although still chaotically divided, has largely decided, having bought the Trump ticket, to take the ride.

A meeting of the Republican National Convention Committee on Rules and Order of Business is not typically thrillville, but bear with me here, because this was an unusually dramatic meeting of the Committee on Rules and Order of Business. It began on Thursday morning, ominously, with a printer jam.

The ostensible printer jam led to a one-hour delay, then a four-hour delay. Soon word leaked out that the printer jam was a ruse to cover for a secret meeting between the activist delegates, their allies, and the Republican National Committee, which has considered Trump the nominee for months now and whose priority is to create for television audiences an orderly show of a convention, similar to years past, with the nominee smoothly coronated and celebrated as the balloons fall from the ceiling.

(Later, officials insisted there had indeed been a printer jam, but admitted it was not the reason for the long delay.)

Behind closed doors, in a conference room up an escalator from the convention-center basement where the committee was to meet, the negotiators huddled. The rebels' key figures included Ken Cuccinelli, the former attorney general of Virginia; Kendal Unruh, a schoolteacher and delegate from Colorado; and U.S. Senator Mike Lee of Utah.

Cuccinelli, a conservative operative who worked on Ted Cruz's presidential campaign, wanted procedural changes for future presidential primaries—in particular, he wanted to encourage states to close their primaries to non-Republicans by awarding more delegates to states with closed primaries. Not a rules committee member himself, he was the ringleader for a group of mostly Cruz-supporting members seeking procedural reforms.

Unruh, a Cruz supporter whose group, Free the Delegates, had teamed up with O'Keefe's Delegates Unbound, wanted to change the convention rules to specify that delegates could vote however they wanted, regardless of their state's primary results. Failing that, Unruh, a member of the rules committee, hoped to get 28 votes for a minority report that could be brought to the convention floor.

And nobody knew what Lee wanted. The prominent Senate conservative who had endorsed Cruz and criticized Trump sits on the rules committee member along with his wife. He was the subject of much speculation and scrutiny in the days before the meeting, his role thought to be potentially pivotal in swaying undecided committee members. He hadn't tipped his hand publicly, but privately, Lee, a self-described constitutionalist appalled by Trump's seeming lack of principles, had [decided](#) he backed Unruh's "conscience clause" as well as Cuccinelli's proposed reforms.

From the start, then, the rebel delegates had competing agendas and little coordination or joint planning. They were flying blind and, to some degree, bluffing; Unruh publicly insisted she had the votes for a minority report, but independent whip counts consistently failed to substantiate her claim. O'Keefe, for his part, is a libertarian advocate with ties to the Koch brothers who sees delegate reform as part of a larger agenda of rolling back what he sees as pernicious Progressive Era attacks on private institutions; he was aided by Dane Waters, a Washington-based consultant, ballot-initiative expert, and elephants'-rights advocate; and Curly

Haugland, a commercial swimming-pool builder from North Dakota and perennial rules gadfly whose 100-page manuscript on delegate binding had languished, unread, in many a fellow delegate's inbox for years. Haugland subscribed to an exotic view of the existing RNC rules that held that, with the exception of 1976, convention delegates had *never* been bound by their state's voters, and had voted as if they were only out of a combination of tradition and false consciousness.

The unique intra-party divisiveness of Trump's nomination had given all these eccentrics an opening to push their particular agendas, and they had seized it. O'Keefe and Waters took Haugland's much-dismissed manuscript and had it bound into a glossy paperback, titled *Unbound: The Conscience of a Republican Delegate*. "When I came along and knew all the history and, like, ate it all up, Curly was pretty pleased," O'Keefe told me drily. "That doesn't happen all that often in Curly's life."

So, there they all were in the convention center, trying to figure out if there was a deal they were willing to make. But the talks eventually fell apart when Priebus was unwilling to exchange the closed-primary bonus for the rebel bloc's votes on the rest of the rules. Closed primaries would help conservative-movement candidates like Cruz, who tend to command more support from Republican stalwarts than from crossover or independent voters. It would dramatically alter the landscape of the pivotal New Hampshire primary, which is open to all voters. And it would be a slap in the face to Trump, who was launched to the nomination by his dramatic New Hampshire win—powered disproportionately by the votes of non-Republicans.

Priebus and his allies were nervous enough to keep a tight watch on the proceedings, but they were pretty sure they had the votes. Why should they give the rebels anything?

The rules committee had been meeting for several hours when the confrontation finally came—from an unexpected source.

Unruh hadn't yet introduced her "conscience" amendment to unbind the delegates. Early attempts by reformers to defy the will of Priebus and his allies—on matters including the closed-primary proposal, and a measure to prohibit corporate lobbyists from serving on the RNC—had fallen fall short. Senator Lee spoke in favor of closed primaries, calling them the best way to preserve the party's identity and elevate "candidates who share our values," but the measure got just 32 votes.

It was now past dinnertime: In late afternoon, the committee had voted to push through and finish its work in a late-night session, rather than reconvening Friday morning. This was a mark of the establishment's confidence, as well as its ruthlessness. Knowing the rebels still needed more time to organize, and knowing that tired delegates have less patience for endless procedural debates, the Trump allies pressed their advantage.

As the delegates debated, a horrible terrorist attack took place in France. Trump postponed his vice-presidential announcement, seeming to waver on his expected choice of the governor of Indiana, Mike Pence.

Activists across the country were watching the rules committee: following along on C-SPAN3, where they were being broadcast, or on Twitter, or on blogs like The Resurgent, where a steady stream of posts by the anti-Trump radio host Erick Erickson urged the rebels to take courage. But it was not the rebels who made the move that would draw them into a checkmate.

It was Jordan Ross, a lumbering, white-haired Nevada delegate attending his first convention, who serves as the elected constable for a desert outpost on the California border. He wore his constable's uniform on the dais and spoke up in a booming voice, frequently employing colorful metaphors. The amendment he offered would make the rules explicitly state that delegates are bound.

"It's time, after all these years, to put an end to this," Ross intoned. "Let's give the people what they expect—that their votes count."

A delegate from Rhode Island, Eileen Grossman, agreed: "I will not turn my back on the millions of people that voted for Donald Trump," she said. The whip effort by the anti-Trump advocates, she noted, had deluged her with hundreds of emails, many of them threatening, and when she responded politely, "the responses were not nice."

The rule was approved, 87 votes to 12.

Unruh brought up her proposal next. The serious-faced brunette seemed to take a deep breath as she prepared to make her case. "Does anybody need any information on the conscience clause?" she joked, an allusion to the deluge of emails.

Unruh cast the choice in religious terms, comparing delegates' right to vote their preferences to doctors' right to refuse to perform abortions. "That is a God-given right, and it should not be taken away by the RNC," she said.

With little discussion, the committee moved to cut off debate and defeated Unruh's proposal on a voice vote. Then Ross—who had, he told me later, worked with the Trump campaign to draft his proposals—put forward another measure that would codify binding. That's when Lee got up to speak.

The voters are important, Lee said, but the delegates are an important safeguard that shouldn't be removed. Presidential candidates, he argued, have to win over the voters *and* the delegates. For Trump to silence the delegates, he claimed, would only deepen the party's internal strife: "This problem, this angst ... isn't going to go away just because we paper over it with rules," he pleaded.

But Texas delegate Steve Munisteri delivered a rebuke: "Sir, there's nobody else running for president in this party right now than Donald Trump," he said. And a Hawaii delegate named Nathan Paikai, who wore a red sweatshirt, a long, wispy beard, and a Make America Great Again hat, broke down in tears as he exhorted, "He is the nominee because he *won!*"

There were a few more things to discuss, but it was a formality. The last-ditch effort to stop Trump had been routed in a clean sweep. They never managed to come up with satisfactory answers to the biggest questions surrounding their effort: How could they justify overriding the popular will? And who would they get to run instead?

At every turn of this unusual Republican primary, there has been a vocal minority of dissenters who saw stopping Trump as a necessity of apocalyptic proportions. But their efforts were always too little too late: the elected officials, the operatives, the donors, the establishment, all seemed to mobilize only after Trump took firm hold of the party's reins. Their efforts mattered—many felt they were laying down a marker of principle against a nominee they saw as ruinous or toxic. But in the end, the great majority of the party regulars succumbed to their unorthodox new ruler, preferring the chaos they were already in to the chaos they could not imagine.

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Ross told me he was proud to have served on Trump's behalf to defeat what he saw as a "disingenuous" effort by Cruz to sneak his way to a nomination he did not earn, in defiance of popular will. (The anti-Trump delegates all denied they were working on Cruz's behalf.) "This was not a grassroots movement, it was a marketing campaign attempting to exploit dissatisfaction with Mr. Trump among a small group of people," he said. It was, he added, "pathetic."

For their part, the rebels would not acknowledge they got beat—Unruh vowed to wage a floor fight nonetheless. I ran into O'Keefe walking down the street, disgusted by what he saw as an establishment ambush: "Repellent behavior," he said, shaking his head, "reflective of the coming regime if he wins." The next day brought new Delegates Unbound press releases arguing for yet more exotic interpretations of the rules.

After midnight, a *Washington Post* reporter spotted some of the rebel delegates at a hotel bar, where the bartender had announced last call. A motion to suspend the rules and keep the bar open was denied.

