

IT BEGINS: A Top White House Official Is Using Their Own Money To Explore A 2020 Run Against Donald Trump

WASHINGTON, May 18, 2018 — A Republican with the widespread name recognition that comes from serving at the highest levels of President Donald Trump's administration has already formed a presidential exploratory committee to look into challenging him in 2020 to prevent him from dividing the country any further, according to a person with direct knowledge of the matter.

"The opportunity is there," said the committee insider, who previously worked for the potential candidate and still serves in an advisory position. "At the end of the day, this person believes that another Trump term would result in a further fracture in the public discourse and further division in the country."

"The issue is convincing [them] it's the correct move," the source said, adding that if the individual is even looking at running, it could mean the committee's work in that area is as much as 65 percent complete.

A presidential exploratory committee, traditionally the first step toward a White House run, allows a potential candidate to conduct polling and measure interest in their campaign without formally becoming a candidate.

The one, *BeltwayBreakfast* was told, began one week ago on behalf of a senior administration official who is well known to the general public.

While the source cautioned that the potential challenger's name can not yet become public "because of the current work this individual has done or is doing," he or she called them a "household name" familiar to most Americans.

But after *BeltwayBreakfast* obtained documents showing persons with links to the administration official had engaged typical vendors used by an early-stage exploratory committee, the source was willing to authenticate the documents so long as none were published.

However, the source would not confirm the name of the individual exploring a run, and when asked, would only say that they "strongly urge caution moving forward due to the nature of the work he or she currently performs" within the Trump administration.

The potential candidate has put up "seed money" for the exploratory committee, but the committee has not raised any outside funds at this early stage. Exploratory committees must adhere to Federal Election Commission fundraising limits, but because the FEC doesn't require candidates to file reports of contributions or expenditures until they officially declare they are running or start campaigning, a presidential hopeful can test the waters without creating a public paper trail.

Although Mr. Trump filed a statement of candidacy the day after he took office and already has a small campaign operation running in the basement of Republican National Committee headquarters, this senior official is the first Republican to make anything resembling a serious move against the president.

If he faces a primary challenge, he would be the first incumbent GOP president to do so in nearly three decades.

The last time a Republican had to beat back a credible primary challenger for the right to run for a second term was 1992, the president was George H.W. Bush and the challenger was conservative commentator Pat Buchanan.

Although Buchanan did not win a single primary election, his proto-Trumpian campaign garnered 2,899,488 votes by focusing on immigration and social issues.

Bush's weaker-than-expected showing opened a window on his right that businessman Ross Perot exploited in the first of his two independent White House bids. The billionaire's presence on the ballot split conservatives and allowed Democrat Bill Clinton to claim an electoral college victory with a plurality of the popular vote.

Most talk of a GOP primary challenge has centered around never-Trumpers and former Trumpers

One prominent name among "never-Trump" Republicans who has often been cited as a possible 2020 challenger is Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz.

Flake became one of the most well-known voices of protest on Trump's right flank after he announced his retirement and delivered a series of floor speeches denouncing aspects of the president's conduct. But despite his apparent break with Trump, Flake has continued to be a reliable vote in favor of the president's nominees and legislative priorities.

Another group of names frequently bandied about comes not from Congress, but from the long list of top officials who've left the Trump administration. Thanks to a turnover rate some estimates have put at around 50 percent, there's no shortage of possibly disgruntled ex-Trumpers whose experiences on the inside might have convinced them that they could do better.

The list of Trump administration castoffs has gotten so long that MSNBC's Rachel Maddow — who has kept a running tally on her nightly program — was recently to extend it around a corner on her set's wraparound video-wall display.

However, the only high-profile ex-administration official to have made anything that could be remotely considered a break from Trump is former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

A recent speech had Washington wondering whether Tillerson had unfinished business with Trump

Tillerson may have good cause to not be enamored of Trump, who he once reportedly called a "moron," after the president announced his firing via Twitter and officials leaked details of his being informed of his pending demise by White House Chief of Staff John Kelly while the then-Secretary of State was sitting on the toilet in a hotel in Africa.

Washington was abuzz this week after video surfaced of Tillerson — who's made himself scarce since his firing — delivering a commencement address at the Virginia Military Institute that some observers saw as a rebuke to an administration that frequently denounces unflattering news stories as "fake" and has embraced what Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway notoriously called "alternative facts."

But even if he's still sore about his tenure at Foggy Bottom, it's far more likely that Tillerson — who never cared much for DC or its culture — will continue to enjoy the benefits of his retirement from Exxon-Mobil — where he spent his entire career before being tapped to by the nation's top diplomat — rather than return to public life by challenging Trump.

The call is coming from inside the (White) House!

While that long list of names on Rachel Maddow's wall could end up providing a steady stream of surrogates for this senior administration official, he or she will have to join them to mount a primary bid because the potential candidate is one who still goes to work for the administration every day.

One high-level Republican who could mount a credible White House run and is currently still in government service is Vice President Mike Pence, who recently denied any prematurely presidential ambitions after reports surfaced of his outsized involvement in the 2020 midterm elections.

Asked if the former House member and Indiana governor was considering a run before 2024, Pence spokeswoman Alyssa Farah replied: "Of course not."

Another high-level Trump officials who might still harbor presidential aspiration is Rick Perry, the former Texas governor and current Secretary of Energy also ran in 2012 and 2016.

Both Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Office of Management and Budget boss Mick Mulvaney have experience serving in elected office as well. Sessions spent decades representing Alabama as one of the Senate's most conservative members and the much younger Mulvaney was a longtime House member from South Carolina and helped found the uber-conservative House Freedom Caucus.

Although it is often said that every senator sees a potential president in the mirror, Sessions appears happy in his "dream job" as Trump's Attorney General, where he's become a key player in the president's efforts to clamp down on the border and get rid of persons in the country illegally.

Mulvaney, who is moonlighting as acting director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, might be too busy dismantling the agency he once called a "joke" to think of much beyond that.

But the name of another prominent South Carolinian — former governor and current UN Ambassador Nikki Haley — is often on the tongues of Washington's most dedicated presidential prognosticators, often after she manages to defy, contradict, or even subtly rebuke her boss without provoking his peripatetic twitter finger.

While being a subordinate who is seen as a potential rival usually means a death sentence in Trumpworld, Haley's perch in New York and her frequent public expressions of loyalty have largely insulated her from the wrath of a chief executive who hates being overshadowed by anyone, ever.

Representatives for Haley, Mulvaney, Perry, Sessions and Tillerson did not yet return requests for comment by our deadline.

This story has been updated.