

The Psychology of the Impossible Campaign: An Investigation Featuring George Pataki

Why do people run for president even though they cannot win? And how should we the voters feel about them? A psychological investigation featuring George Pataki.



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T.A. Frank

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This inquiry into a presidential candidate with no chance of winning begins with an admittedly insulting premise: that its subject, who has technically laid out his reasons for seeking the White House, is running for reasons unknown. But I'm not alone in being baffled by the candidacy of George Elmer Pataki. (His middle name is employed mainly by his detractors, because it is Elmer.) As

Chris Cillizza wrote several months ago in *The Washington Post*: “Wait. Why is George Pataki running for president?” If we had a good answer to this question, wouldn’t we be wiser — not just about George Pataki but about the psychology of all politicians? Thus began my quest.

Pataki made his entry into the race official on a Thursday morning, May 28, in the town hall of Exeter, New Hampshire. It was a hot day. Everyone was sweating, women were fanning themselves, and there was no air-conditioning. In contrast to the campaign launch in 2007 of Barack Obama, which brought a standing outdoor crowd of roughly 15,000, the campaign launch of George Pataki brought a seated indoor crowd of roughly 240, including about 40 members of the press.

Sitting to one side of Pataki were his family: wife Libby, daughters Emily and Allison, sons Owen and Teddy, both of whom have served in the military (in Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively), brother Louis, and assorted in-laws and grandkids. In the front row, directly across from Pataki’s podium, sat six men in *kippahs*. One was Herman Friedman, a campaign bundler and, according to his website, “Entrepreneur & Visionary.” Another was Ben Landa, head of a nursing-home empire. Near these men, in the front row but one section over, was a doctor named Ramon Tallaj, a former health official in the Dominican Republic who is now a prominent GOP fundraiser and head of an organization of 1,200 physicians called Corinthian Medical IPA.

Some people proved harder to identify. One heavysset man, sporting a blazer and slicked-back gray hair, told me he was an “entrepreneur and businessman” and gave his name as “Jimmy,” and then, upon further inquiry, “Jimmy J. Anonymous.” I never figured out who he was.

Among the audience, clustered in a few rows just off the center aisle, were about two dozen nonwhites, mostly Latinos. One woman carried a board that said, “*Hispanos Con Jorge*.” Her name was Stephanie Duluc, and she said she’d come from New York to be there. I asked why she admired Pataki. “His leadership, I guess,” she said. “He has worked a lot in the Hispanic community.” Another lady, seated in the back row, waved me away when I approached. “I don’t know nothing,” she said. “Thank you.”

MANY CANDIDATES WITH no chance of victory run for president because of conviction. Like, say, Ron Paul in 2012 or Bernie Sanders today, they have a set of issues they passionately want to advance.

This does not, as far as I can tell, apply to George Pataki. As Jonah Goldberg put it in a column last month, Pataki seems to be “pretending to have core convictions just so he can run.” Even the Pataki website motto — “People over politics” — suggests a desire to avoid serious thought. And such an impression is nothing new. As Pataki’s third term as governor of New York was winding down in 2005 and 2006, *The New York Sun* wrote that “one looks in vain to discern any principle or idea that Mr. Pataki stands for consistently.” Columnist Deroy Murdoch wrote in *National Review* that Pataki was “a politician of breathtaking mediocrity” whose “lack of competence, charisma, and character composes a sickening trifecta.” Kindest was *The New York Times*, which complained that under Pataki “reform was a talking point, not a doing point,” while nonetheless conceding that, overall, “New Yorkers are well aware that it is possible to do worse.”

Another common explanation for why people choose to run doomed presidential campaigns is that it raises the odds of getting a Cabinet post. Perhaps Pataki wishes to be secretary of Agriculture? But that’s unlikely. While steering a federal department is prestigious, the work is hard. Which, I’m afraid, brings us to another harsh point made by many observers of Albany: that Pataki is not only light on convictions but also disinclined to exertion. “The consensus was he was a lazy guy,” says George Marlin, a leader of New York’s Conservative Party, who was appointed by Pataki to head the Port Authority but later became a prominent critic of the governor. “Energy was not his strong suit.”

In 2006, *New York Post* state editor Fredric Dicker described Pataki’s administration as one “marked by a torpidity unprecedented in modern times” and estimated, based on testimony from sources in Albany, that Pataki averaged about 15 hours of work per week. Meanwhile, *The New York Observer* saw a “legacy of laziness, mediocrity and pervasive neglect of the public interest.” The 15-hour-a-week claim seems improbable, of course, and Pataki’s spokesperson David Catalfamo calls it “ludicrous,” saying no one lazy could get elected three times, enact numerous changes, or steer the state through the aftermath of September 11. But it’s fair to say that those who praise Pataki tend to mention intelligence or analytical power rather than midnight oil.

Energetic oversight and grueling schedules characterize the successful Cabinet secretary, the George Marshall type. It’s tough to imagine that Pataki is running for president in order to set himself up for this kind of job.

FOR HIS LAUNCH speech, Pataki wore a navy suit, white shirt, and blue tie with a quiet pattern. After an introduction from his wife promising that “He. Will. LEAD,” Pataki took the podium. “Thank you, thank you, thank you so much,” he told the cheering 200. “You’re the reason I’m here this morning. To help your future be better futures.” After more thanks, he broke in with: “*Y tambien a todos mis amigos que estan con nosotros hoy, gracias por su apoyo.*” In 2002, during his most recent run for governor, Pataki taught himself Spanish.

What followed did not satisfy those looking for distinction. Pataki spoke of “intrusive government” getting in the way of businesspeople, of a childhood on a farm in Peekskill, New York, where “we believed in the American Dream,” and of plans to replace “dependency with opportunity.” On foreign policy, he wanted to “strengthen our military,” “stand with our ally Israel,” and make America a “champion of liberty and freedom.” Lines like “We will create and innovate, jobs will flourish, and peoples’ faith in America’s future will soar” were delivered in a stage whisper to signal intensity.

There were some jabs at Hillary Clinton. There was a vow to repeal Obamacare and Common Core. There was a shout-out, followed by a standing ovation, to all members of the U.S. military and veterans, including Pataki’s two sons. Pataki promised that he would prevent Iran from getting a nuclear bomb and would fight ISIS on the ground if it became necessary. He vowed to enact a “lifetime ban” on members of Congress “ever becoming lobbyists.”

(RELATED: It’s Unclear Why Pataki Is Running)

During a final few lines that were supposed to invoke “the dreams of a young child born today, whether in downtown Baltimore or upstate New York,” Pataki went off-script and added “or right here in Nashua, New Hampshire.” Since this was Exeter, and Nashua was about an hour away, cries of “Oh” went up among the press corps, and Pataki’s people looked stricken. The speech concluded seconds later, the crowd stood to applaud and holler, and the candidate, who probably hadn’t noticed the mistake, beamed and took hugs from his family, who looked grim-faced. Was this going to be the news item of the day?

Pataki left in a black GMC Yukon, and everyone filed out. TV reporters stood outside filming segments, and organizers cleaned up inside. I noticed that pretty much every person of color I’d seen in the room was now gathered outdoors at a bandstand across the street. Several minutes later, a large white coach pulled up, and all of them boarded it. It drove away.


A few hours later, *The New York Times* noted Pataki's blunder in a short item called "George Pataki Flubs New Hampshire Locale in Kickoff Speech." The reporter, Alan Rappeport, had enough mercy to call the mistake "common" and write it off as "a little bit of rust." All in all, it was also a reminder that there are still some benefits to being in last place. The story had no legs, because no one cared.

"VANITY," WROTE JOHN ADAMS in 1782, "is a passion capable of inspiring illusions which astonish all other men." Could that be a factor in George Pataki's presidential bid?

On the surface, no. As politicians go, Pataki seems modest. Political vanity as a concept feels better suited to explaining someone like Donald Trump. (Pataki, for the record, recently condemned Trump's inflammatory remarks about Mexican immigrants and challenged him to a debate on immigration. Trump did not respond to the invitation, although he did briefly take to Twitter to assess Pataki's record among governors as being "one of the worst," a phrase he had previously reserved for Mario Cuomo, Barack Obama, the Safe Act, Charles Krauthammer, an advertisement by the political action committee American Crossroads, and Palm Beach County Airports Director Bruce Pelly.)

Unlike Trump, Pataki exudes caution; he doesn't jab a finger at the listener or insist that he has the answer to everything. Such modesty has worked for Pataki historically. When he ran for governor in 1994, taking on incumbent Mario Cuomo, he ran an exceptionally disciplined campaign, refusing to be colorful and focusing strictly on taxes (anti) and the death penalty (pro). Voters were sick enough of Cuomo to go for it. As New York state's electorate moved left, Pataki followed along, setting aside initial fiscal austerity and most conservative social policies, much to the chagrin of New York conservatives.



 Pataki in Exeter, New Hampshire, on May 28, the day he declared that he was running for president. (Darren McColleston/Getty Images) GETTY IMAGES

His manner has always been conciliatory, and, while his detractors are many, his outright enemies are few. “There is no dark side to George Pataki,” says Bernadette Castro, who was New York state parks commissioner during all three of Pataki’s terms in office. “He’s going to try to win you over. He’s not going to try to crush you.”

Caution in one context can be vanity in another, however. To enter a packed presidential field without something notable to say is like addressing a crowd in a whisper and expecting people to shut up and listen. Hermès can put its name to a shoe and charge high prices, even if the product is on its own unremarkable. Vanity may explain why a politician would think he could pull off something similar.

THE EVENING OF his first official day as a presidential candidate, Pataki showed up in Hampton, New Hampshire, at the Smuttynose Brewing Company, the ideal sort of small business for a campaign appearance, because it still produces something tangible. Hillary Clinton had paid a visit there only a week earlier, prompting some Republican activists to call for a boycott of Smuttynose beer. This made a counterbalancing visit by Pataki especially welcome to management. About 25 people were there, including a CNN duo consisting of a scowling Briton and a friendly cameraperson. Turnout, Smuttynose employees later told me, had been larger for Clinton.

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State Senator Nancy Stiles, a silver-haired Pataki supporter in a red suit that bespoke common sense on a budget, told me she'd been won over by Pataki's neighborly pragmatism after he'd gone door-knocking with her in October 2014 during her run for office. With Pataki towering beside her (he is six-foot-five), and both facing the audience and the row of fermenting tanks behind us, Stiles told the audience that Pataki was "a real person. He listens to people." One-half of Pataki's mouth smiled. "He's a visionary, but he works for solutions," she said. "Let me introduce you to the next president of the United States, Governor Pataki."

Pataki thanked Stiles. "She starts out saying I'm a normal guy, and I'm here in a brewery in a suit and tie," he said, to laughter. "Believe me, if I wasn't coming from something else and going to something else, I'd look a lot more like you than I do right now." Pataki turned to owner Peter Egelston, who was tieless. "You put on a *tie for her*," Pataki said, referring to Clinton. More laughter. "No, you don't have to put on a tie for me," Pataki quickly added, looking self-conscious. "In fact, I'd love to take mine off for you" — he started to loosen his tie — "but I do have to go for another thing." The tie was now slightly undone, but the collar remained buttoned. The effect was not Reagan-esque.

The candidate repeated the morning's themes of Washington intruding on people's lives. "The greatness of this country comes from the American people when the American people are *free to dream, free to strive, free to work to achieve those dreams*," Pataki said, again with the breathy whisper. "This is a great state, this is a great country. We're gonna make it better. Thank you, thank you. Now I'm gonna have a beer!"


"I'll tell ya. This reminds me so much of when I ran for governor. No one had heard of me."

Once he had a Finestkind IPA in hand, Pataki took a couple of questions, offering a few more answers about how the American people, not Washington, should decide things. The CNN crew got a moment with Pataki on his way out and asked about his chances. “I’ll tell ya. This reminds me so much of when I ran for governor. No one had heard of me,” he said. “I have always started at the bottom. I think it is the best way to do it. You appreciate something more when you earn it.”

COUNTLESS PSYCHOLOGISTS HAVE studied the delusions of those who engage in long-shot gambling. One unsurprising finding is that few of us intuitively understand statistics. As Lloyd Christmas in *Dumb and Dumber* says to a love interest when she explains that his chances with her are one in a million, “So you’re telling me there’s a chance.” Other factors, as summarized in a 1998 article in the *Journal of Gambling Studies*, include “cognitive entrapment, a belief in hot and cold numbers, unrealistic optimism, a belief in personal luck, superstitious thinking, the illusion of control,” and “the erroneous perception of near misses.”

Perhaps Pataki’s previous gambles have given him an unrealistic sense of the odds involved in this newest venture. He unseated an incumbent when he ran for mayor of Peekskill in 1981. He knocked incumbents out of the state Assembly in 1984 and the state Senate in 1992. And everyone agrees that his victory over Cuomo was a remarkable upset, one pulled off by someone who’d garnered fewer than 90 mentions in *The New York Times* in all the years prior to 1994.



 in 1994, Pataki pulled off a remarkable upset, ousting Gov. Mario Cuomo. (James Leynse/Corbis) JAMES LEYNSE/CORBIS

Indeed, it's easy to see why, in Pataki's eyes, 2016 might not look like such an impossible gamble. The very act of announcing a U.S. presidential candidacy, of commanding a podium and drawing a CNN crew and *New York Times* reporters, is something done by at most several hundred Americans over the past few decades. Just by getting that far, you are already one in a million. How much more of a leap is it really to become one in 300 million?

"Lightning can strike," says former Indiana Governor and U.S. Senator Evan Bayh, a Democrat who counts Pataki as a friendly acquaintance from their overlapping stints as governors. "You never know. He's been governor of a big state. Sometimes the unexpected can happen."

THE NEXT DAY, around noon, team Pataki alighted upon the Havenwood Heritage Heights retirement community in Concord. The room, in the basement, was too large, with about 100 chairs. An energetic advance team would have removed most of them to someplace out of sight. But the solution in this case was to gently herd people, about 25 in number, toward the middle.

Pataki's look today was less formal: khakis, a soft-shouldered casual blazer with sleeves that were too short, and a pair of long square-toed loafers. When he was accidentally introduced as a three-term governor of California, he quipped, "I know, I look like Arnold Schwarzenegger." His remarks recapped the favorites: Government should serve us; we shouldn't serve the government. He spoke of "the small group of elite, liberal, left people" who think they "are smarter than us, know better than us, and have the right and the power to tell us how to live our lives."

This was an informed group. One audience member asked about the Simpson-Bowles deficit-reduction plan and student debt. Pataki gave a decent but long answer about the perverse tuition-raising effects of lowering interest rates. Another asked about restoring the 40-hour workweek. Pataki gave a weaker, much longer answer that put a lot of the blame on the Affordable Care Act. A third asked about illegal immigration, and Pataki gave his longest answer of all: a plan to first "secure the border" and then offer legal residency instead of citizenship.

"You know one of the things I'm really bad at?" Pataki said. "Politicians are supposed to give an answer in 30 seconds, in eight words. I apologize for that. I've done a lot of this over the years. I'm very passionate about it. Oftentimes, the answer isn't as simple as some politicians and media would like you to think."

I confess I'd been a little bored and distracted, but Pataki seemed to get a favorable response. Afterward, I asked the immigration questioner if the governor's answer, which struck me as lengthy but dubious (how did he propose to "secure the border," and why would Latino voters reward Republicans for championing residency status if Democrats are offering citizenship?), had satisfied him. "Yes," the man said, to my surprise. So there. Reporter proven wrong; Pataki proven right.

THE PROCESS OF pleading for people's votes looks horrible. But Pataki claims to enjoy it, and his aides echo his assertion. One must also admit this much: It's probably no drearier than sitting in midtown Manhattan tending to the affairs of the Pataki-Cahill Group, "a specialized business development firm providing high-level strategic and tactical advice." At least Pataki is meeting politically engaged people and having his movements scheduled by aides, as in the old days.

Ashley Weinberg, a psychologist at the University of Salford who has interviewed dozens of former members of the British Parliament about why they liked their jobs, says that the phrase “being at the center of things” kept coming up. That yearning doesn’t require convictions. “You’re sensing things happening around you,” Weinberg says. “Which is quite different from whether you want *specific* things to happen around you.”

(RELATED: Pataki Raises \$256,000, Lowest Amount of Any GOP Hopeful)

Even if it’s partly selfish, that desire to be at the center of things can spring from a perfectly honorable place. “I miss it every day,” says Evan Bayh of his time in office. “Every night, when you put your head on the pillow, you can normally think about something you’ve done that day that helped the people of your state. I think former governors may be particularly susceptible to missing that.”

MY SIT-DOWN with Pataki took place outside the True Brew coffee shop in downtown Concord. It was still hot, and Pataki removed his blazer. During our interview, after finishing his coffee, he flipped his empty paper cup with his fingers as he talked. He is obviously experienced at handling the press, guarded but stimulated, like a tennis player awaiting a serve.

Pataki started out on-message, telling me that what distinguished him from other candidates was governing as a Republican in a blue state, lowering taxes, “reducing the welfare rolls by over a million,” and so on. But he got less rote as the interview went on.

He talked about losing touch with Hungarian relatives after the uprising of 1956 — the Patakis are a Hungarian family — and how this shaped his leanings when he first got interested in politics at Yale in the 1960s. When he attended Columbia Law School, it was right in time for the 1968 protests that saw the occupation of administration buildings and ended with a harsh crackdown by police. Pataki opposed the student rebels, but he does not seem to have been radicalized by the experience. “One of the things I’ve always been able to do is to have serious philosophical disagreements with people without making them personal disagreements,” he told me.

He said he’d considered running in the 2008 presidential election but bowed out to avoid adding another New Yorker to a race in which Rudy Giuliani seemed to be riding high in the polls.


I asked if his campaign against intrusive government meant that he opposed National Security Agency surveillance or the Patriot Act. “The Patriot Act has helped to protect us from other attacks here,” he said, reminding me that he was governor of New York on September 11.

“By the way, Dave,” Pataki said to David Catalfamo, his spokesperson, across the table, “thank Alicia for all the help she’s been giving me in the interview. She’s been great.” Alicia Preston, Pataki’s press secretary in New Hampshire, had left the table about 15 minutes ago.

I requested a thumbs-up or thumbs-down take on some of the more heated political votes in recent years. The “Gang of 8” immigration bill: “I have my own ideas on immigration.” The Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP: probably yes, “but I haven’t seen it.” The bailout of General Motors: yes, but “I think there were parts of the pre-packaged bankruptcy that were more politically oriented than economically oriented so I would have tweaked it.” The Troubled Asset Relief Program, which bailed out the banks in 2008: “I really think that was a very bad idea.”

I asked if having sons in the military had affected his outlook on deploying troops. Pataki spoke of missing a call from overseas at two in the morning and fearing the worst. “You can’t help but have the natural fears a parent will have when your child is in harm’s way,” he said. “So yes, it reinforced what I’ve always believed, that we have to be very prudent in the use of force.”



 Pataki says he weighed running for president in 2008 but bowed out because of Rudy Giuliani. (PAUL J. RICHARDS/AFP/Getty Images) AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Pataki is obviously a close follower of the news, and it was easy to picture him reading the paper and feeling a sense of frustration unique to former officeholders: *I used to be able to do something about this.*

Alicia Preston reappeared to tell Pataki it was time for an interview on *The Michael Medved Show*, which he took over the phone. As he answered Medved's questions, tapping his leg much of the time, Pataki was suddenly a candidate who spoke in brief answers. "I've always considered myself to be a limited-government conservative, and I'm very proud that we were able to reduce the size, the cost, the impact of government on people's lives." "I believe personally that life begins at conception, but I don't think it's Washington's right to impose my view on people who

don't share that view." (Pataki has always been pro-choice.) "I'm against federal funding of abortion. I believe we should leave those issues to the states and to the people."

Afterward, I delicately invited an explanation for the contrast between his somewhat lengthy answers in person and his concise and seemingly effective answers on the radio. He said it was luck of the draw. "You never know. I've given some really good speeches, and I've given some really bad speeches, and I never know which it's gonna be," Pataki said. (When I reached Medved later, he said that Pataki, a friend from Yale, was always great on the airwaves. His advice to the candidate: "George, treat answering questions from an audience the way you treat answers on the radio.")

Mistakes on a campaign trail don't bother Pataki too much. "You kick yourself for about two minutes, your staff tortures you, makes fun of you, and you laugh," he said. "My speech to the firefighters?" (Pataki and several other presidential candidates spoke to a gathering of the International Association of Fire Fighters in Washington this past March.) "One of the all-time worst speeches ever given by a political figure, and while I'm doing it, I know it's a complete catastrophe." He said that Republican Rep. Peter King, who spoke first, had already made a lot of the points he'd hoped to make, causing him to try last-minute improvisation.

How did he exit the situation? "Humbly," Pataki answered. "Let me out the back door."

SELF-REGARD, self-delusion, a desire to return to the center of the action, a selfless sense of public spirit — we can at best say that a mixture of these factors account for why someone like George Pataki would run for president.

Yet it seems slightly unfair to leave things there. To ask "why" about Pataki's candidacy might be obvious, but it also rests on a number of unspoken assumptions about our political system. Perhaps we should be asking questions about those assumptions, too.

The former New York governor is clearly seasoned and intelligent, more so than many of his opponents; yet we tend to accept that his current lack of celebrity makes these credentials unimportant. Why, exactly? Why is someone like Marco Rubio viewed as a more credible candidate? For some reason, we allow name recognition to become its own justification.

(RELATED: Seven Things You Learn About 2016 Campaigns From Starting at FEC Data Too Long)

Pataki's candidacy also raises questions about the role of boldness and ideology in presidential elections. Our campaign process favors hyper-ambition over a more laid-back approach. And, increasingly, it seems to favor hard-liners over moderates. "Who's going to be willing to jump through all of these hoops, to spend all day calling strangers to beg for money, to put their personal lives and their families through the media wringer?" says Stanford political scientist Andrew Hall, who studies this phenomenon. "It's by and large going to be people whose views are extreme enough to make them feel like they have to do it."

Most of us don't much care for these realities. The stakes of each race go up too much: Victory by one side becomes the victory of someone who is, in the view of the opposing side, crazy. Pataki is neither bold nor ideological; as a result, almost no one could view him as crazy, and perhaps that's a plus. "I think he believes he has as much as anyone and maybe more to offer the country as president of the United States," says former U.S. Senator Al D'Amato, who was a crucial backer of Pataki's 1994 run. "And he's a conservative who's not a wackadoodle."

Arguably, it's a shame that our presidential system makes it difficult for people like George Pataki to run. I suspect, if Pataki were in office, that his squishiness of ideology and unlikeliness to accomplish much would be a quiet strength, much like W.S. Gilbert's *House of Peers*, which did "nothing in particular, and did it very well." Pataki's politics and temperament seem especially suited to those who lean right in the culture wars but would just as soon see them go unfought. They want illegal immigration stopped, but they don't want to get nasty about it. They want honest police, but they don't accept riots. They're fine with same-sex marriage, but they're also fine with recalcitrant bakers. They're done with war, but they want ISIS crushed. They're a bit fed up, but not violently so. At a time when it often seems, as Yeats famously put it, that the "worst are full of passionate intensity," maybe it's also true that the "best lack all conviction." Maybe Yeats was saying that George Pataki is the best.

PATAKI'S FINAL PUBLIC appearance on his first post-launch tour of New Hampshire was on the *M/S Mount Washington*, a 230-foot excursion ship that takes people on three-hour cruises around Lake Winnepesaukee. For \$50, about 500 passengers could enjoy roast beef, strawberry shortcake, and a chance to see

speeches by former Virginia Governor Jim Gilmore, former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton, current Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, current Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker — and Pataki.

The weather, once again, was hot, the main room stuffy. The roast beef, on the other hand, was not bad. The main event took place on a part of the boat with a stage and, in front of it, a parquet dance floor. Emceeding the event was SiriusXM Patriot radio-host David Webb, who struggled to get anyone to pay attention.

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It promised to be a long evening. Pataki dutifully ambled around the decks and dining tables, looking for people to greet, clasping their hands, and regularly flashing a half-smile. “Hello, how are you? Good to see ya. How are ya?”

Most of the tables were in other rooms entirely out of view of the main stage, and I wondered how cruisers would be able to get a good look at the Republican speakers. I didn’t yet realize that few of them intended to listen to the speakers.

As we set sail, cruise organizer Alan Glassman announced that Bobby Jindal had bowed out and so had John Bolton. Scott Walker was on his way but had literally missed the boat. Glassman decided that we would sail about for a while and then go back to port to collect the governor of Wisconsin.

Webb called Pataki up to the podium to give the first speech of the evening, and the din of chatting diners receded not at all. A small, tight U of onlookers, a substantial number of them with cameras or microphones, crowded in to hear what Pataki had to say. The remarks, to the extent I could hear them, echoed his standard campaign language, with talk of intrusive government and “tax-code gobble-dy-gook.” Pataki makes a lot of words seem like tongue twisters.

“Are there any veterans here?” Pataki asked, a question that would have worked well in a rapt ballroom, less so among a fidgety scrum of 50 people, many of them press. “You are the best,” Pataki said to vigorous applause from a handful of people. “Raise your hands so we can salute you.”

As he spoke, I strolled about the boat to see if anyone else cared. No one did. People ate their dinners and talked among themselves. You could hear Pataki over the loudspeakers in the ceiling, if you concentrated. This truly was like whispering in a

crowd. But did it seem egotistical on the part of George Pataki? Not really. It seemed more like gamely soldiering on, despite the indignity.

Pataki is neither bold nor ideological. As a result, no one could view him as crazy.

Pataki's speech ended, to additional applause from a small group in his immediate vicinity. Glassman, the organizer, presented Pataki with maple syrup and a couple of other mementos. Jim Gilmore now took the stage and, if it was any consolation to Pataki, commanded no more interest.

The boat returned to port, where, waiting at the dock with his aides, was Scott Walker, looking boyish and attentive. The press hustled over to film his arrival, and governors Gilmore, Pataki, and Walker gathered on the upper deck to pose for photographers together. Some passengers sought out the candidates to speak to them, but most did not. The ones who were most eager to greet the candidates seemed, frankly speaking, to be the least normal, the sort who make you feel they might be better served by some other hobby. These were not likely Patakiites.

THE DIVERSION OF the vessel back to port had one great advantage for Pataki and me: It gave us both an excuse to leave. Pataki and Alicia Preston made their way down the gangplank and up to the main road, and I eagerly trailed. "I wouldn't mind having a drink right now," Pataki said to her with tired cheer.

Noticing me, Pataki reached around to shake hands once more, and I thanked him for getting me off the boat. "You've suffered enough," he said with a grin. "Say something nice, just one out of the 20 things, because we saved you an hour."

We can all tell more than one story about the various episodes and choices in our lives. We can tell ourselves why our actions were honorable or why they were base, and often, even in our own minds, both versions feel believable. I could tell you that Pataki is a vain has-been whose campaign is useful only as a case study in why some politicians delude themselves into thinking they have a chance to be president. Or I could tell you he's the quixotic voice of moderation in a crazy time, a man whose candidacy helps lay bare the absurdities in our current presidential selection process.

The facts to support either of these points line up equally well. But let's be kind. I'll return to John Adams. "The steady management of a good government is the most anxious, arduous, and hazardous vocation on this side the grave," he wrote, entreat-

ing the reader to think twice before encumbering those “who have spirit enough to embark in such an enterprise.”

The black Yukon pulled up; Pataki and Preston got in. In the weeks that followed, Pataki continued to campaign in New Hampshire, canceled events to attend to a son-in-law who was hospitalized, celebrated the birth of a grandchild, and hit the trail some more.

Would George Pataki be a good president? Well, let’s just say that follow-through is not his strong suit. If it’s customary to campaign in poetry and govern in prose, Pataki campaigns in prose and governs in emojis. But that doesn’t make his candidacy pointless. To quote *The New York Times*, we should be “well aware that it is possible to do worse.”

T.A. Frank is a writer in Seattle.



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