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## ‘We Just Want Someone Sane’: What Happens When a Small Town Goes MAGA

Analysis by Francis Wilkinson | Bloomberg

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(This is the second in a series on how the spread of election denialism has affected Pennsylvania politics; the first is “In Pennsylvania, the Big Lie Is Spreading Its Roots.”)

Washington County was never known as Crazytown. The parameters of local power weren’t hard to discern when steel and coal dominated the economy. They’re not much different now. Situated at the western edge of Pennsylvania, the county of 200,000 sits atop the Marcellus Shale. Gas is plentiful and the industry that extracts it is influential. Some farmers have gotten rich leasing rights to their land. Plenty of workers, blue- and white-collar, are doing well servicing the industry. The county, still crawling out of the deep pit left when union steel and coal jobs vanished, has made itself a reliable partner to drilling.

Yet if you look at local politics, the landscape appears as disfigured as a mountaintop lopped off for quick, gruesome profit. The volcanic dissolution of Republican politics, from conservative to MAGA, from solidly corporate to chaotically Trumpist, has remade state capitals around the country. But it has worked its way deep into small towns and counties, too. In nearby Allegheny and Butler counties, election denial, extremism and furious infighting among factions have upended Republican politics. In Union Township, in Washington County, four of the five township supervisors resigned last fall along with the township’s accountant and solicitor. One departing supervisor cited public harassment and “intimidating behavior,” including “heinous comments and false accusations.”

Despite a shared MAGA faith, and fealty to every carbon-based energy form, local Republicans appear in a near-constant state of one against all. At a Washington County Republican “unity” event around Christmas, the incumbent county controller threw a drink — glass included — at another Republican. Meanwhile, the incumbent Republican county prothonotary — the civil court clerk — is under investigation for accessing a county database to gain “potentially confidential information of various prominent political figures, attorneys and private citizens.”

A GOP candidate forum on March 28 in Washington, the county seat about 30 miles south of Pittsburgh, put the MAGA-fication of local politics on full display. If such events were once predictable in a certain way, with local candidates doing their best imitations of Ronald Reagan or some local worthy, they have become familiar in an entirely different way, with candidates aping the professional wrestling ethos of Marjorie Taylor Greene, Jim Jordan, Lauren Boebert and other MAGA performers. The candidate forum, held in a dark and cavernous event space containing perhaps 100 people, presented local politics as burlesque.

As in other Pennsylvania counties, three commissioners form the top of the county power pyramid, with elected “row officers” — essentially clerks who handle the filing of various county documents — arrayed beneath the bipartisan (by law) triad of commissioners. The current partisan alignment is two Republicans and one Democrat. Incumbent Democrat Larry Maggi is expected to be reelected in November, with Republicans well positioned to retain the two other slots. But as the parade of candidates for the May 16th primary suggests, “Republican” is a word in flux.

Republican Diana Irey Vaughan has been the dominant force on the commission for years. But Vaughan is a Reagan conservative in a party with no appetite for cheerful conservatism. A born-again Christian who says she and her husband, a captain in the county sheriff’s department and retired colonel in the US Army Reserve, have five AR-15 semi-automatic rifles at home, Vaughan asserts that she doesn’t hate anyone. In a different era, that might have registered as a personal disposition or religious declaration. But in MAGA world, it’s a political pronouncement, and a defiant one at that. Vaughan is frequently called “Democrat Diana” — it’s not meant as a compliment — on MAGA social media. After 28 years as a commissioner, she is not running for reelection. She is more than a little concerned about who her successor might be.

“When I ran before,” she told me, “it was, ‘We want someone who’s business-friendly, someone who knows finances, someone who’s got some experience’.” Now, she says, her supporters have a different emphasis. “‘We just want someone sane.’ Just let that sink in. That’s what they want.”

In 2019, a first wave of MAGA candidates took over three Washington County row offices, including the clerk of courts. The previous clerk had been a Democrat who was subsequently convicted of stealing almost \$100,000. (The theft was uncovered in a county audit.)

Somehow, Brenda Davis, the MAGA candidate who won the office in 2019, transformed an office rocked by major scandal into an even more exciting place. Like many in Washington County, Davis was once a Democrat. A former mayor of the city of Washington, she now periodically vents her views on the nefarious capabilities of local voting machines. As clerk of courts, she refused to follow the direction of the county commissioners on a matter relating to juvenile court cases. She then openly defied a judge’s order. Eventually, sheriff’s deputies (including Vaughan’s husband) were dispatched to execute the court’s rule. A video of the event, shared on social media, shows Davis collapsing to the floor and wailing

rather than surrendering to the law. She was sentenced to two weeks in jail for contempt of court. She was also stripped of staff and a significant part of her budget.

Davis, who is now running for reelection, is currently embroiled in a new scandal after she altered a local news story about county government and posted her misleading version on her campaign Facebook page. At the party candidate forum on March 28, she delivered a Trumpist tour de force, wallowing in victimhood while denouncing the perfidy of her tormenters. Her campaign message was a primal scream. "You want to do the right thing in Washington County?" Davis roared. "You're going to get punished!"

As the evening proceeded, and more candidates spoke, Davis's seemingly bizarre performance reverted to the mean. Indeed, compared with James Roman, Davis was positively subdued. Roman, the register of wills, was also elected in 2019. In addition to his efforts to unsteal the stolen election of 2020, Roman is notorious for having been arrested carrying a gun into the county courthouse. Despite a seemingly straightforward job processing wills, adoption documents and other paperwork, Roman has brought volatility, drama and high decibels to the workplace.

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Whether Roman would speak at the forum was at first unclear. He was still outside the venue distributing literature when it began. County GOP chairman Sean Logue told the audience that Roman had resigned from the party. "He told us he didn't want anything to do with us," Logue said. "He said he would sue us if we brought up his name or invited him." Roman either threatened to file charges against party leaders or they threatened to file charges against him, depending on whom you believe.

Roman nonetheless entered the room eventually, and, after a vote on the matter by the audience, Logue invited him to speak. Roman wears his political oppression on his sleeve. "This room's afraid of me and won't allow me to talk," said Roman, who was, obviously, talking. "I've been told by these people that they will arrest me if I attend the Washington County Republican meeting," he added, from a location quite visibly inside a GOP meeting. "That's a lie! That's a lie," someone in the audience shouted. Other shouts, about other alleged lies, punctuated his remarks as Roman proceeded to unfurl his own litany of accusations and personal grievances. "Don't listen to all this crap that's out there," he said. "Cause none of it is true."

### A MAGA Star Is Born

When Trump commandeered the Republican Party in 2016, it was already in many respects a post-truth party. Trump's unprecedented torrent of documented falsehoods, after all, would have doomed him in a healthy political party. In Washington County Republican politics, seven years later, truth is akin to a human appendix. It may have had a purpose at one time or another, but no one seems to need it now.

The candidate forum was occasionally comic. In a rambling, disjointed soliloquy, the Trumpy county coroner, a man who literally administers death, announced, “You’re gonna take my gun out of my dead, cold hand.” But the event was notable mostly as a MAGA fantasy land where candidates chose their own adventures, and realities.

Brenda Davis’s story is that the local government is incorrigibly corrupt but the state government is not so bad. That narrative doesn’t work for Nick Sherman. As a veteran GOP commissioner, Sherman has been one of the three people in charge of local elections. To find a viable niche in MAGA mythology, Sherman must absolve himself of the infamous stolen election of 2020 while still allowing that the grand theft took place on someone else’s watch. In his telling, local elections — his responsibility — have been the honest exception to pervasive corruption. “If the rest of the state would’ve ran their elections office the way we did Washington County, Donald Trump would still be your president,” he lied.

Longtime incumbents like Sherman, encumbered by pre-MAGA history and epistemology, straddling old and new Republican regimes, are at a disadvantage. Though he was clearly trying to work his way into MAGA grace, Sherman received the kind of tepid applause that the crowd reserved for the few more traditional conservative candidates who appealed for support.

The star of the night, by contrast, received a standing ovation. A stay-at-home mom with a high-school degree, Ashley Duff’s inaugural political campaign aims at the top — commissioner. Unlike Sherman, she’s free to call everything, everywhere corrupt. She also has talent. Duff seemed sharper than most of the candidates, and a good bit more charismatic. Her message was linear, coherent, delivered with energy and verve. It even seemed marketable outside the MAGAverse. Unlike other candidates, Duff stressed economic growth and jobs: It wasn’t all about her personal grievances.

Not that Duff doesn’t have a few.

Duff earned her MAGA spurs by riding the Washington County Commission like a mule and whipping it with abandon. Commission meetings provided public comment sessions, which Duff used to air the conspiracy theories that buttress her political support. She has peppered the county elections office with baseless accusations dressed up as requests for public information. She has championed the serial nonsense of Douglas Frank, a crackpot math teacher from Ohio who has forged a living peddling falsehoods about the 2020 election. And she has gained enough notoriety on the reality-resistant right to win the endorsement of Mike Lindell, the pillow salesman, coup-promoter and circuit-riding conspiracy theorist who has been working the Big Lie since 2020.

Duff’s restless, angular energy reminded me of Colorado Republican Lauren Boebert. Since the last time I had seen Duff, in the fall of 2022, she had adopted a side part and glasses, reinforcing the resemblance.

Like some of her peers running for office, Duff has a perplexing back story. A decade ago, a local television news station profiled Duff and her husband, describing their uncanny skill at “extreme couponing.” Duff’s husband Chris Duff said the young couple kept their family grocery bill under \$20 a month while generating tens of thousands of dollars in free goods for local charities. Their extraordinary prowess led to an appearance on a cable television show devoted to extreme couponing. That, in turn, led to scrutiny. After an inquiry by a blogger, a spokesman for Proctor & Gamble confirmed that coupons used on the show by Chris Duff were counterfeit. (Duff did not respond to my text message requesting an explanation.)

Duff’s running mate for the other likely Republican commissioner slot is Bruce Bandel, who also appeared at the forum.

Bandel said the Spirit of the Lord had spoken to him about their ticket. “I’m the integrity and she’s the virtue,” he said of himself and Duff. “You get it? IV? We’re the IV, the blood of Christ that will penetrate this county and we will once again see the baptisms, the spirit of God, even in raising of the dead and holy miracles.”

I asked a few political veterans in Washington County if they thought a Christian nationalist – Bandel wants Jesus to be the “cornerstone” of the courthouse – whose platform includes miracles could be elected commissioner. All doubted it. When I asked whether his running mate, Duff, could soon become a commissioner, no one did.

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“They’re gonna get what they ask for,” said Ernest Benchek, a civil engineer and moderate Republican who has donated to many GOP candidates, including Diana Irey Vaughan. “If Ashley Duff wins in 2023, then it’s her spot. That’s what the people wanted. So they have to live with the consequences. I mean, it’s just like all of our row officers that got elected four years ago. That’s what the people wanted. You see how that’s going?”

#### A Wild River of Rage and Suspicion

Diana Irey Vaughan looks weary. Sitting at a bar, a neglected glass of white wine before her as she works her two cell phones, she is discussing county government not in the abstract but as a public workforce that she has personally overseen for 28 years. “People are afraid. People are fed up. And people are looking elsewhere,” she said. MAGA has breached the government walls.

“There is a tremendous impact that this movement has had on government that the public may never see directly or understand,” she said. “We have an executive assistant in our offices who is retiring Thursday. And the first candidate we offered the job to declined because they don’t know what the atmosphere could be like after this election.”

In truth, the atmosphere hasn’t been great for a while. Vaughan has spent the years since November 2020 fending off wave after wave of loony accusations and seedy vitriol. When

one conspiracy theory is shut down, another rises to replace it. Last fall she told me that, after 2020, she had been given a list of local dead people who had voted in the election. She found all of them “very much alive.”

Commission meetings have been transformed into open venting sessions for MAGA activists like Duff who could never be satisfied by evidence or facts. The opportunity costs to local governance, when so much attention is diverted from roads and contracts to rebutting the fantasies of activists, are difficult to quantify. But Vaughan said she has personally spent hundreds of hours dealing with MAGA nonsense. “So have our staff and legal team, researching their claims, which are all baseless,” she said, costing taxpayers “a great deal in resources.” The cost of rage and suspicion is even harder to quantify. Both are ever-present.

Vaughan had planned to run for reelection this year. She had amassed the largest campaign treasury of any county politician. She commissioned a poll last fall. Her reputation for competence is well established and the poll was encouraging enough. Among the three incumbent commissioners, she was first choice. What the poll could not accurately measure, however, was the madness coursing through the county like a wild river bursting its banks.

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On a Saturday in February Vaughan was at a memorial service for a deceased friend when she was accosted by a local man. “I’m by the casket trying to pay my respects. And I’m hearing about . . . how the election was stolen, the cabal, how 17 planes are filled with gold and buried under the Vatican. And how the Queen was running a child sex-trafficking ring out of Balmoral Castle. This is my Saturday trying to pay my respects to a dear friend. They had asked me to speak at the service. I said, I’m sorry I have to leave.”

The following Tuesday, Vaughan announced her retirement. “I couldn’t bring myself to run again,” she said.

While we were talking, a local Democratic lawyer approached to say hello to Vaughan. He told her he is running for reelection to his local school board. But his board, like others in the region, has been targeted by Moms for Liberty, the right-wing group supporting book bans and anti-LGBTQ policies. Members of the group gained a foothold on the board in the last election. They are looking to secure their dominance in the fall election.

I asked Vaughan if she believes Melanie Ostrander, the county director of elections and voter registration, will be in jeopardy once Vaughan departs. “Absolutely,” she said. If Duff or her running mate is successful, “there would be pressure to eliminate that position.” Ostrander, too, has spent weekends and late-night hours rebutting conspiracy rubbish. She reads conspiracy websites and watches conspiracy movies to stay a step ahead of the crazy. Dozens of county election directors have been driven out of office in Pennsylvania since 2020. Ostrander realizes that she might be next.

She said directors of other county departments are also anxious. “Because we’re trying to do our jobs,” she said. “Because we do that, and they attack the commissioners, we’re seen as puppets, sympathizers.” The cultural revolution has come to Washington County.

#### Blame the Wireless Thermostats

Dave Ball didn’t attend the candidate forum in March. He probably wasn’t missed. Ball was the Washington County Republican Party chairman until last fall. He gained national notoriety, and opprobrium, in 2021 when he lashed out at Republican Senator Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania. Toomey was among a handful of GOP Senators who voted to convict Donald Trump of inciting the [January 6](#) insurrection. “We did not send him there to vote his conscience,” Ball said of Toomey. “We did not send him there to do the right thing or whatever he said he was doing.”

Writing in the Washington Post, liberal columnist Greg Sargent cited Ball’s comment as evidence of the GOP’s descent into a “very dark place.”

But that was 2021.

In 2023, in Washington County, Ball is on the outs with local Republicans. Not for having demanded that Toomey acquiesce in a violent assault on US democracy. Ball didn’t retire from his party post because he was too MAGA. He quit the field — he was pushed out, as others phrase it — because he was not MAGA enough, not white Christian nationalist enough, not at war with objective reality enough.

Ball doesn’t think much of the new party leadership, and he expresses dismay at the quality of GOP candidates. “We have some very unqualified people running for row offices who have no idea what they’re doing,” he told me. “It’s a chaotic situation.”

I emailed Sean Logue, the new chairman, to ask if the county party was endorsing a slate for the primary. I wondered if Duff’s name would be on it. He replied, “No comment.” For his part, Ball simply would not, could not, get over the basic math that stood between the fantasies of local MAGA activists and the reality of the 2020 election. “I’m a very pragmatic person,” Ball said. “I think that’s why I probably have been successful in politics. I’m not an ideologue.”

Trump did well in Washington County in 2020, winning 61% of the vote. But the “zealot-class people” in the party, Ball said, some of whom rarely encounter a Biden supporter, insisted that Trump somehow, somehow, must have done better — locally, statewide, nationally. One explanation of Trump’s shortfall was that Washington County voting machines, which are not connected to the Internet, had been manipulated by a wireless thermostat. It’s not a huge stretch from there to having county commissioners raise the dead.

Pennsylvania’s richest trove of votes is in the southeast, which is vigorously anti-MAGA. Even in Washington County some Republicans left the presidential line on the ballot blank

or wrote in Mike Pence's name. Ball explained the numbers. He walked the militants through the political realities. They didn't care. They still don't. When I met him for breakfast at a local hotel, Ball moved gingerly. He is 80 years old and recently had a hip replaced. A retired engineer who worked for US Steel, including a lengthy stint in India, Ball has seen the world and is obviously intelligent. Yet of all the choose-your-own-narrative adventures in Washington County, of all the perspectives warped by fantasy and whataboutism and contempt for truth, Ball's is among the oddest.

Believing Trump's obvious falsehoods, or at least convincing yourself that you do, absolves you of the obligation to face the political, moral and social consequences of his lies and destruction. Ball's bargain is trickier. He won't abide the lies about a stolen election. But he resists acknowledging that the lies were part of a comprehensive debasement of democracy, and a violent rending of American society.

It's notable that the 2022 election losses by Pennsylvania Republicans Doug Mastriano, in the governor's race, and Mehmet Oz, in the Senate race, did not generate conspiracy theories equal to the post-2020 Trump madness. Neither man contested his loss. Given Ball's adherence to election math, and his dismay over candidates whose flaws — nincompoopery, deception, self-service — are quintessentially Trumpist, I asked Ball if recent experience had made him rethink his support for Trump himself.

"Trump's concept of America first policy I still think is the right way to go," he said, while allowing that Trump personally had "worn out his welcome." I pressed Ball about that. Trump, after all, originated the stolen election lie. His presidency spread lies, stoked rage, amplified division. He continues to pledge vengeance throughout the land. Wasn't Trump directly responsible for the degradation of the party and the nation?

"Oh, that's fine," Ball said, acknowledging the point. "But you know, I have a hard time getting too excited about that when I'm looking at Biden's lies."

If America succumbs to self-delusion and slides into authoritarian, buffoonish and terminal decline, Ball's evasion would be an apt epitaph. Yes, that's what did it. "Biden's lies."