



MONTHLY  
**Portland**  
OREGON'S ONLY REPUBLICAN  
CONGRESSMAN KEEPS RISING. THE  
CLIMB IS GETTING WEIRDER AND WEIRDER.  
BY NIGEL DUARA / ILLUSTRATION BY MAX-O-MATIC

# WELCOME TO WALDEN WORLD

“THE QUESTION,” ASKS A NEW  
YORK TIMES EDITORIAL ON FEB. 1,  
“IS WHETHER THERE ARE ANY  
ADULTS LEFT IN THE GOP.” DAYS  
LATER, GREG WALDEN BOWS HIS  
HEAD IN PRAYER AT THE OREGON  
FREEDOM RALLY, A THOUSAND-  
STRONG GATHERING IN THE BALL  
ROOM OF A HOLIDAY INN NEAR  
PORTLAND INTERNATIONAL  
AIRPORT. →→→→→

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The 61-year-old Republican congressman seems much the same figure he was 20 years ago, when he first won his House seat. Same patrician nose, thick glasses, and familiar air of *hey-how-are-ya* folksiness. If you walked into an H&R Block looking for last-minute tax help, you would be thrilled to see such a figure.

The crowd, wearing American flag wristbands handed out at the entrance, is very white. White hair, white skin, sparkling white teeth. A blond vocalist leads the crowd in the national anthem, then “God Bless America.” Attendees paid \$45 a head to get in. I spot one red MAGA hat.

From the stage, a couple warm-up acts talk about Democrats in Salem and their nefarious ways, particularly a pending bill on end-of-life care that some claim will harm (even kill) Alzheimer’s and dementia patients. “The majority party isn’t listening,” says Oregon Right to Life lobbyist Jessica Stanton.

Finally, the headliners. Walden—as Oregon’s only Republican in either house of Congress since US Sen. Gordon Smith lost reelection in 2008, he has steadily climbed the ranks of the dominant House GOP hierarchy—studies his phone, then steps onstage. A host presents him with both the Taxpayer Association of Oregon’s Thomas Jefferson Award and a drawing of Walden by an 11-year-old. With the Super Bowl between New England and Philadelphia coming up, Walden has his applause line ready: “You’re the Patriots and Eagles I want to be with. This is the Super Bowl of conservative politics I’m talking about!”

Then his voice darkens. He mentions the town hall meetings where protesters shout him down. He motions to the ballroom doors, and beyond, where tonight dozens of protesters wave Russian flags and signs that call Walden a tool of both Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump.

“Would you get me a little help?” he asks the crowd. “It’s a little lonely. I’m on the endangered species list.”

A curious statement from an influential ranking member of the party in complete control of the federal government. Walden represents Oregon’s Second Congressional District: one of Oregon’s five districts, the largely rural expanse takes in about 70 percent of the state’s land area, mostly east of the Cascades but also reaching over the mountains to Medford and (some of) Grants Pass. The *Cook Political Report* notes that Republicans enjoy an 11-point advantage in registered voters in the Second. Nineteen of its 20 counties went for Trump in 2016; Walden himself garnered 72 percent of the vote, beating Democratic challenger (Googling now) James Crary by 44 points.

Since that shockwave election, Walden has proved he can navigate the president’s fickle affections. In May 2017, from his perch atop the powerful Energy and Commerce Committee, he pushed through the House bill to end the Affordable Care Act, then sunned himself next to Trump and the media hours later in the Rose Garden. Within weeks, Trump would tell senators the bill was “mean, mean, mean.” Walden was unhappy. But he stood down, perhaps fulfilling the most important strategy for surviving and thriving under Trump.

**WALDEN HAS PROVED HE CAN NAVIGATE THE PRESIDENT’S FICKLE AFFECTIONS. FROM ATOP THE POWERFUL ENERGY AND COMMERCE COMMITTEE, HE PUSHED THROUGH THE HOUSE BILL TO END THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT, THEN SUNNED HIMSELF NEXT TO TRUMP AND THE MEDIA HOURS LATER IN THE ROSE GARDEN. WITHIN WEEKS, TRUMP WOULD TELL SENATORS THE BILL WAS “MEAN, MEAN, MEAN.”**

If Walden is “endangered,” it’s not because of the Democratic activists he invokes at the Freedom Rally. Rather, his favored political style seems positively quaint right now. Walden has always positioned himself as a pragmatist, someone who would skip fire-breathing rhetoric and work with centrist Democrats to find that elusive middle path. Meanwhile, over his nearly 20 years in Washington, Walden’s party has ... changed. The “Contract With America” pursuing a Clinton impeachment in the late 1990s became the “compassionate conservatives,” then the muscular interventionists of the post-9/11 years. The Recession-stoked Tea Party obstructionism of the early Obama administration transformed into—well, whatever the hell the GOP is today.

In many ways, Walden remains the same Episcopalian/Rotary Club/Chamber of Commerce moderate he’s always been, but the balance between his natural orientation and the political current is not always comfortable. At the Holiday Inn, his kitchen-table-style speech could come from his 1998 campaign.

Liberals are out of touch; they don’t live in the real world. A Reagan quote about government being too big and too expensive. No new regulations. Real Americans. Some folksy Second District wisdom: “You don’t run full steam ahead into a box canyon, and that’s what Pelosi and Schumer did to their constituents.”

It’s not connecting with this room. Walden mentions refugees, and refers to America as the beacon on the hill that “welcomes” newcomers. Silence. Then he touts the House majority’s accomplishments, particularly the 2017 tax bill. Tepid claps. Even the Reagan quote doesn’t really land.

Walden wraps up and bids the crowd good afternoon. A moment later, an African American man with a cream-colored Stetson perched on his head stalks on to the stage. The crowd sparks to life with chants of “Lock her up!” David Clarke smiles. The former sheriff of Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, Clarke resigned in 2017 after many scandals and a rise to Fox News fame as a commentator. Clarke was a rumored Cabinet contender, though how seriously Trump considered this remains unknown; today, he’s doing this: a traveling road show supporting the administration.

He begins in a ghost-story whisper. The monster: Special Counsel Robert Mueller. “The FBI has become part of the deep state,” Clarke breathes into the microphone. “I don’t trust Bob Mueller as far as I can throw him. He’s relying on his fake dossier to go after President Trump. Somebody’s got to step in and shut that investigation down. I don’t suggest it be the president. But we can’t just let that thing go on.”

The crowd leans forward in their chairs, rapt. Clarke’s voice grows louder. He praises the American embassy’s move to Jerusalem—big applause. He warns the assembled voters not to get complacent before the 2018 midterms. He faults Democrats for polarizing the nation.

“Hell, yeah, we’re angry!” he shouts, and the crowd erupts in applause. Walden, seated, claps along. After Clarke comes the closer, National Rifle Association personality and cable TV regular Dana Loesch. She invites liberals to come and *take* her guns.

After the rally, Walden spends a brief moment talking to reporters. There’s a small media scrum, mostly locals there to ask Walden about the protesters. I interview a man in an ill-fitting tan suit about why he’s here. He gives me his name, Joey Nations, but will not let me record the interview. Then he demands to see my notes. I demure. Then he demands I delete my notes. I decline. He glowers and stalks away. (I may have gotten off easy. Nations apparently took to punching anti-fascist protesters at the waterfront last summer.)

Walden clarifies that this event wasn’t held by the Republican Party, but by the grassroots elements in the state, the people “out there knocking on doors.”

So, the question: what is a guy like Greg Walden doing hanging out with the likes of David Clarke and Dana Loesch?

“Look, I believe in free speech. We should be tolerant of different opinions,” Walden says. “I think we’ve gone so far in the era of ‘we’ll be tolerant of your speech as long as you agree with mine’—it just doesn’t work.”

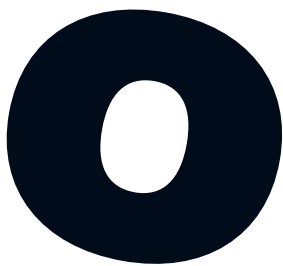
Is there any political risk in showing up with this group?

“I stand by my views, that’s what people will judge me on,” he says. “And I hope they do. But look, these people care a lot about the country, as well. And they get out and they vote, and they have every right to be heard.... Look, we’re a melting pot. We’re a democracy, and we should have the right to come speak. Should I be precluded from speaking before a group because there are other speakers that have different opinions? I don’t think so.”

What’s it like to be a centrist in today’s GOP?

“I’m an old Eagle Scout. My job’s to leave the campsite better than I find it. So I try to stay out of the alt-right, alt-left, whatever-you-want-to-call-it debate. I don’t know how that moves us forward as a country.

“I know mine’s a lonely voice.”



**O**N A MUGGY PRIMARY NIGHT in May, the Democrats of Bend gather in 10 Barrel Brewery’s upstairs party space to celebrate, however briefly.

Purple seems the color of choice. Opposing state legislative candidates make complimentary speeches about one another. Conviviality reigns. Apocalypse IPA flows.

Tonight, candidate Jamie McLeod-Skinner doesn’t have much to worry about. A projection-screen map of the Second District begins to tally her commanding lead over six opponents vying to take on Greg Walden in November. She gleefully hugs her wife and their children as the crowd roars with applause.

The imminent midterm election has Democrats across the nation scanning polls for portents of a “blue wave.” With Trump as polarizing as ever but Democrats lacking a clear national leader, the campaign ramp-up has seen liberals rally to an array of insurgent mini-celebs, from Bronx Democratic socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to that “Iron Stache” guy running in Paul Ryan’s Wisconsin district. In Central and Eastern Oregon, Democrats say—and might really believe—that a fresh face like McLeod-Skinner could leverage the blue patches of cities like Bend, Ashland, and Hood Riv-

er and general discontent to bring Walden’s seat into play.

“What I hear from conservative Republicans in rural areas is, ‘[Walden is] not the guy he used to be, and he doesn’t represent us,’” McLeod-Skinner, a civil engineer and former city planner whose platform reflects many mainstream Democratic policy positions, says on primary night. “Broadband access and net neutrality are huge in rural areas. Republicans in rural areas want health care for their families, and they see that he has led the attack on it. So there’s issue after issue that he has not shown up for.”

Does she really think the Second District—which, since its advent in the 1890s, has elected a grand total of two Democrats—could really turn its back on a centrist, entrenched Republican?

“I think initially, he was that guy,” McLeod-Skinner says. “He’s no longer that guy. As he’s moved up the food chain in Washington, he’s really shifted focus away from his district. Folks who voted for him in the past are going to hold him accountable.”

Maybe. But probably not. During the primary season alone, Walden raised more than \$3.4 million, and the most recent reporting by ProPublica shows a fundraising total of \$4.2 million. McLeod-Skinner had raised only \$283,000 as of this July. Walden has won 10 elections against nine different Democratic challengers—he defeated certified hypnotist Joyce Segers twice—all by at least 26 percentage points. McLeod-Skinner is almost certainly next.

She would lose to a man born into politics. Walden’s father, Paul, was a three-term state legislator who also owned a radio station, KIHJ, still based in a small, brown vinyl-sided house in Hood River. Greg started with a janitorial job at the station, and by 1986 had bought it from his father. Meanwhile, however, his ambitions had already shifted. From 1981 to 1987, Walden served as chief of staff and spokesman for Rep. Denny Smith. He steered the photogenic Republican’s responses to various crises, from Smith’s second divorce to his entanglement with the failed savings-and-loan industry.

In one very odd 1986 episode, another Smith aide transported a six-to-eight-foot-long antitank cannon to Washington for possible sale to the government. The gun discharged a nine-inch shell, striking a gas pump in Arlington, Virginia, sparking a fireball that seriously injured three people. The task of brushing away the various national security (and basic sanity) questions fell to Walden, who mounted a blasé response to the *New York Times*: “[The other aide] is in the field of testing and development,” Walden said. “He has advised the Congressman on a number of weapons.”

Walden then delivered the most reliable message a DC spokesperson can give a reporter: the congressman is busy and cannot be reached.



**T**WO YEARS LATER, WALDEN WON election himself, securing 55 percent of the vote for an Oregon House of Representatives seat. It would be the closest election he ever faced. He was appointed to a vacant state Senate seat in 1995, and won election to Congress three years later. He sold the radio station group in 2007 for more than \$2.5 million.

His political ascent continued. Major Washington players began to take notice of Walden’s comments. The ensuing scrutiny wasn’t always good.

In 2013, on CNN, Walden told Wolf Blitzer that Barack Obama’s plan to link Social Security payments with the Consumer Price Index was “trying to balance this budget on the backs of seniors.”

Trouble was, the entire Republican leadership wing approved of the idea. Condemnations followed, from a rebuke from then-House Speaker John Boehner to a full-on attack from the conservative Club for Growth.

"We always knew Greg Walden had a liberal record, but he really cemented it with his public opposition to even modest entitlement reform," Club for Growth then-president Chris Chocola said in an April 2013 statement. "Greg Walden has voted for bailing out Wall Street, dozens of pork projects, and against cutting the spending from the Obama stimulus. He even voted against blocking taxpayer subsidies for Viagra."

The Club for Growth, an influential arbiter of right-wing purity, labeled Walden a RINO (Republican In Name Only), frequently the kiss of death for the party's vanishing moderates. Yet Walden crushed a right-wing primary challenger in 2014, maintaining the chairmanship of the House Communications and Technology subcommittee while finishing the second of four years chairing the National Republican Campaign Committee.

He's become a good guy to know in Washington, especially for industry interests. Walden has always pushed for more logging in Oregon's federal forests. (So have Oregon Democrats.) The American Forest and Paper Association doesn't pull much from federal forests, but its interests are inextricably tied to Oregon's wood-producing regions. AFPA has given Walden \$10,000 this election cycle, the ceiling for its 2018 political donations (so far).

"I come from Republican politics in Oregon, and he's been leader of the party, kind of unofficially, for quite some time," said Terry Webber, AFPA's executive director of packaging. "He's a consensus builder, not a bomb thrower. He wants to get people in the room to work toward solutions. His district has suffered among the most of all those in Oregon from some of these policies that hit the mills hard."

Like most extractive industries, wood and paper's relationship to Trump is cautiously optimistic. Webber said his organization would benefit from fewer regulations regarding energy, air, and water, and "making sure the EPA is making decisions based on sound science," as he puts it. Like other business interests, meanwhile, forest and paper guys like Webber would prefer an approach to trade less confrontational than Trump's tariff-slinging, NAFTA-bashing default mode.

They seem to want conservatives happy to deregulate industry, but cautious about Trump's nationalistic adventures. In essence, GOP powerbrokers like AFPA are looking for more Waldens.

**TRUMP'S VOTERS  
ARE NOW WALDEN'S  
VOTERS: TRUMP  
DEFEATED  
HILLARY CLINTON  
BY 20 POINTS IN  
THE SECOND  
DISTRICT. WALDEN  
IS TRAPPED BY  
TRUMP, UNABLE  
TO OPPOSE HIM OR  
SPEAK OUT AGAINST  
HIM TOO LOUDLY—  
INTIMATELY TIED  
TO THIS MAN SO  
UNLIKE HIM.**

**F**OR THE MOST PART, WALDEN'S POLICY victories are boring. "I got an applause line on tax policy!" he exclaimed after the Portland rally in February. Yet his name has been banned as a potential Speaker both in 2015, when Boehner left the job, and earlier this year, when Ryan announced his retirement. His methodical accumulation of committee power and low-key but effective connections (as with the AFPA) would look like an old-school path to the gavel, should that come to pass. (He's said he would consider the job.)

Meanwhile, Walden lives in the same unexpected reality as the

rest of us. Trump's voters are now Walden's voters: Trump defeated Hillary Clinton by 20 points in the Second District. Walden is trapped by Trump, unable to oppose him or speak out against him too loudly, intimately tied to this man so unlike him. His best option, like at the Freedom Rally in Portland, is probably to shrug his shoulders and smile sheepishly when things get weird in the GOP's proverbial big tent. Or he could take the tack he used at an April 2017 town hall rally in The Dalles, which started out confrontational and got worse from there.

"I will support a [border] wall where it makes sense," he said.

"BOOO!" the crowd responded.

Walden raised his left palm—his right held the microphone—in a kind of "stop" gesture.

"No ban, no walls!" some shouted. A man seated near Walden shouted, "Build the wall," and gave the congressman a thumbs-up. The booing got louder.

"Hold on, hold on," he said, trying to shush them. "Everybody, let's ... everybody ... come on ... let's be respectful of different opinions."

This is where Walden finds himself: if Republicans hold the House in November, his influence seems set to grow. He's rising at a time at odds with his past and apparent instincts, but signs suggest he's willing to adapt.

In early 2016, armed occupiers seized the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, deep in Walden's district, to protest the 2012 arson convictions of Dwight and Steven Hammond, father-and-son ranchers who set fire to a stretch of grazing land under disputed circumstances. The occupation became a lightning rod for general antigovernment sentiment, resulted in one death, and crescendoed with the surprise acquittal of some of its leaders by a Portland jury, just a week before Trump's election.

Early this summer, Walden publicly called for a pardon for the Hammonds. In July, Trump pardoned them. To critics, the pardon invited further right-wing violence. "It speaks to a vision of the West where making violent threats to federal employees and public land ... and destroying public property are seen as heroic qualities," the environmental group Oregon Wild said in an online statement. At *Vanity Fair*, a writer deemed the pardon just another effort by Trump to rile up his rural base and "trigger the libs." An oil-company exec with close ties to Vice President Mike Pence flew the freed ranchers to Eastern Oregon in a private jet. Walden called the pardons "a win for justice, and an acknowledgment of our unique way of life in the high desert, rural West."

Greg Walden initially agreed to an interview for this story. He then repeatedly refused proposed meetings in Hood River, Portland, and Washington, DC. His communications staff's message was simple: The congressman is busy and cannot be reached. **▶**

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