

The Brief

TRUMP'S JOYLESS RELAUNCH

BY MOLLY BALL/PALM BEACH, FLA.

The reigning king of the GOP kicks off a third White House bid with an act wearing thinner than ever



INSIDE

THE DEATH KNELL FOR STUDENT-
LOAN FORGIVENESS?

THE COLLAPSE OF
A CRYPTO EMPIRE

A HOLIDAY SURVIVAL GUIDE
FOR SCROOGES

SAY WHAT YOU WILL ABOUT DONALD TRUMP: the man is not a quitter, even when nearly everyone else might wish him to be. His advisers counseled him not to give the Nov. 15 speech at Mar-a-Lago declaring he would seek the presidency for the third time—not while his party was still licking its wounds from the disappointing midterm election, not while the GOP was still trying to win one last Senate runoff in Georgia. The sun had long since set by the time Trump took the stage, palm fronds waving invisibly in the humid dark outside the Florida-rococo auditorium, to make his anticlimactic announcement.

He did so with an air of joyless near-resignation, jaw clenched, glaring at the teleprompters as if they'd done him some unforgivable wrong. He did so in near isolation: though the ballroom was filled with the usual menagerie of hangers-on, there was no retinue of Republican eminences. His wife stood off-stage as he spoke. After the speech, his daughter Ivanka issued a statement declaring she would not be part of the new campaign.

The kickoff came days after an election that called into question his standing as reigning emperor of the Republican Party. The much anticipated red wave failed to materialize, and much of the GOP blamed Trump, many of whose handpicked candidates had been spurned by voters otherwise eager for change. From conservative media to members of Congress, even once sympathetic Republicans were lining up to call him a loser, openly soliciting new leadership.

Trump, as he always has, stood defiant, one man against the world. The establishment could wish all it wanted that he would disappear, but he'd never consent to that. Outside the white-and-gold ballroom, the world was falling apart on multiple levels. With the GOP and Twitter and crypto all imploding at once, a cosmic reshuffling seemed under way. These are the moments Trump has always seized: the every-man-for-himself times, the instances of maximum chaos and disarray, the points at which sensible people run for shelter—the moments when a leader is needed.

HE CAME OFFERING the same thing he always has: defiance, hostility, omnidirectional oppositionalism. Once, this was shocking and new, something no one had ever seen before. Once, America was so desperate for something different that even crazy seemed worth giving a chance. We may be in a different mood now. “People are tired of hating each other, of fighting nonstop,” a former

high-ranking Republican official told me, sounding simultaneously vexed and hopeful.

Many Trump-tolerant Republicans are sick of all the losses incurred under his leadership, and say they're ready to move on. “He handpicked a number of candidates that proved not to be competitive, and Republicans lost a number of races that, had he not gotten involved, we probably would have won,” says former GOP Representative Tom Davis. “He's trying to make a party in his own image, but politics is about coalitions.”

Trump's chances of clearing the primary field may have vanished with those squandered seats. The name on every Republican's lips is Ron DeSantis, the Florida governor whose 19-point landslide was a highlight for the beleaguered GOP. Several new polls show Trump trailing DeSantis among Republican primary voters.

But Trump retains important advantages over his rivals for the nomination. One is his army—the hardcore base that would follow him to the ends of the earth, that would even try to overthrow the government if he told them to do it for him. Another is his sheer recklessness, his willingness to do or say anything, to destroy anything or anyone in his path to get what he wants. He is, once again, the axle around which everything turns. His rivals face a conundrum: if they hit back at him, they risk lowering themselves to his level; if

they take the high road, they risk leaving him unscathed.

In his announcement speech, Trump hit his typical themes but stayed more focused than usual on policy. He did not mention the “stolen” election, the “Unselect” Jan. 6 committee, or the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court he'd forged—the other big factor stymieing the red wave that wasn't. He emphasized trade, China, nuclear weapons, and policing. “The blood-soaked streets of our once great cities are cesspools of violent crime,” he said, calling for the swift execution of drug dealers. He did not lash out at DeSantis or other potential rivals.

Will this really be the beginning of the end for Trump, after everything else that so many thought should have been but wasn't? “I feel like there's enough pent-up desire for Republicans to win that they'll say, we can't keep doing this over and over again,” says David Kochel, an Iowa-based veteran of state and national GOP campaigns. “But something about Trump just understands how to bring people back to heel. It's his superpower, I guess.”

He is a wounded animal—the most dangerous kind. But for now, he has the field all to himself. If anyone else wants to compete, they will have to enter his arena. □

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—DAVID KOCHHEL,
REPUBLICAN CAMPAIGN STRATEGIST