

Phillips Establishes Presidential Bona Fides in New Hampshire

January 23, 2024 **by Dan McCue**



Dean Phillips during a campaign event in Nashua. (Photo by Dan McCue)

CONCORD, N.H. — They told him not to run. How could you consider yourself a loyal Democrat, let alone a loyal member of the House leadership, if you'd dare primary the party's incumbent president?

But Dean Phillips, a moderate Democrat who has now served almost three terms in Congress, had concerns.

Namely, though he strongly supported many of President Joe Biden's policies, he simply believed Biden, already the oldest president in American history, should pass the torch to a younger generation of leaders.

If reelected, he noted, Biden would be 86 at the end of his second term.

On top of that, Phillips had deep reservations abouts Biden's ability to beat former President Donald Trump at the polls a second time.

In late October, the millionaire businessman who is often referred to in print as one of the richest members of Congress, traveled to Concord, New Hampshire, to announce his intention to run.

At the time, he said his decision could end his political career. In short order, he resigned his leadership position in Congress, and days later, announced he would not seek reelection to the House.

His quest, he said, was "incongruous" to his remaining in either position.

And at first, even New Hampshirites, who are proud of the ease at which someone can qualify for the presidential ballot here and welcome all comers, saw him as a bit of a curiosity.

"I'll tell you when I first became aware of his candidacy," said Joseph Kenney, a member of New Hampshire's executive council, the executive body that advises the state's governor on all matters and provides a check to his power.

"Every fall in my district, in the city of Laconia, we have a pumpkin festival, and I was there, doing my thing, meeting and greeting constituents, when I happened to look down the street," Kenney said.

"And I see this bus, with 'Dean' in big letters on its side, and 'for president' in smaller letters, and I thought, 'Did Howard Dean jump back in again?'"

Regardless of what happens at the polls in New Hampshire on Tuesday, few if any Democratic voters in the state don't know about Phillips.

He's worked the state tirelessly since entering the race, and his yard signs turn up on even the remotest of mountain roads. And his commercials, upbeat and positive and forward looking, are a decided relief from those being aired on the Republican side, which are, frankly, scary.

As a result, this past weekend, hundreds upon hundreds of voters in communities all across the state turned out to hear what he had to say.

"The wonder of it is that 90 days ago, I couldn't get five people to show up in a coffee shop," Phillips quipped before an event in Nashua.

"It's pretty amazing what happens when you practice democracy," he said.

On "stage," actually standing amongst rows of seated voters, Phillips effusively asked, "Are you ready for change?" before adding, "Well, me too, me too."

And he wasted no time bashing the Democratic National Committee for refusing to sanction the primary and calling it "meaningless."

"Meaningless? Is this meaningless to you?" he said, a bundle of barely restrained energy and charm. "Well, Tuesday night all of you have a chance to redefine what 'meaningless' really means."

By now, Phillips' life story is well known.

Born just weeks before his father was killed in combat in Vietnam, his mother DeeDee later married Eddie Phillips, heir to

the Phillips Distilling Company and the son of advice columnist Pauline Phillips, better known as Dear Abby.

Eddie Phillips adopted Dean in 1972, and his son would eventually become president of the family liquor business. Dean Phillips would later branch out, becoming co-owner of Talenti gelato and Penny's Coffee. He still owns the coffee business.

Yet for all this success, Phillips somehow remained under the radar, even while serving as a member of the high-profile Problem Solvers Caucus in Congress.

"A certain level of anonymity isn't a bad thing," he likes to joke, "because two-thirds of the country does not hate me. I could have been much better known than I am right now, if I was just willing to be a total jerk."

Phillips explains his longshot candidacy by saying he simply couldn't sit by quietly "at a time when the country is at such great risk."

On the stump, the candidate often talks about his decision to run for Congress in the wake of Donald Trump's election as president in 2016.

"The next morning, I woke up concerned, but what really jarred me was the sound of my daughter Pia, who was 16 at the time, crying in her bedroom," he said. "She had just overcome Hodgkin's lymphoma at the time — a terrible time for her and our family — and she was a gay woman, which I did not know at the time.

"But I saw something in her eyes that told me I had to do something ... so I decided to run for Congress," he said.

“My friends all told me I was crazy ... but I did it ... and we won. And we did it with this really old-fashioned strategy — we used invitation instead of confrontation,” he said.

But the Congress Phillips imagined he was joining was far different from the one he experienced.

“You get to Washington very excited,” he said. “I thought Nancy Pelosi and Kevin McCarthy were going to kind of push us together, in service of our country, and that, whatever our party affiliation, we’d get to know each other, find some common ground.

“Oh, my goodness, my friend. There was none of that,” he continued. “In fact, it was just the opposite. In our Congress the two leaders were practicing systemic separation ... putting us on different buses, even when we were going to the same events ... and demanding that we spend every single free waking moment trying to raise money, which we’d then have to turn over to the parties to spend on defeating each other. It’s the most ridiculous thing you’ve ever heard of in your life.”

Phillips did express pride in his work with the Problem Solvers as well as the Select Committee for the Modernization of Congress.

When mention of both drew only a smattering of applause, Phillips wasn’t surprised.

“Very few of you have heard of us. I know that. And do you want to know why?” he said. “It’s because we’re the workhorses, as opposed to the show ponies.

“The other reason you haven’t heard of us is because when you actually work hard behind the scenes in Congress, and actually build relationships and get things done, that doesn’t help the narrative for Democrats or Republicans.

“So you don’t know about us. But we’re the ones that go to the White House and work together, trying to keep this country together at a time when both parties are trying to pull it apart.

“Are you sick of this dysfunction and battling each other instead of fighting for you? Are you tired of Democrats and Republicans acting like kindergarteners? I’m tired of it. Do you want to join me in trying to change that?” he said to loud applause.

“I’m running for the future,” Phillips added. “I think we can relieve the pain and suffering in this country. I think we can restore and repair the wounds of this country. And I think we can reimagine the future.”

One of his vehicles for doing that would be to establish what he called “American Dream accounts.”

“In essence, the federal government would endow an investment account for every baby born in the United States,” he said.

“We’d start by putting \$1,000 into an account that would invest in the American equity markets and American growth companies,” he explained. “Then, each year, we’d add another \$500 to that account.

“If it grew by 6% a year, by the time they graduated high school, they’d have \$20,000, maybe more,” he said.

Phillips said such an investment would enable “everybody to have a stake in the economy.”

“They could potentially make a down payment on a house, or maybe start a small business. And they wouldn’t have to live in mom and dad’s basement. It’s kind of the complement to Social Security. Why are we not a nation that gives every kid a chance,

the equality of opportunity, and meet that at the end of retirement?”

Phillips also said he wants to create a national health insurance program, which he said could be delivered less expensively than what people are experiencing while also “delivering results that are above the middle of the pack.”

He also proposed extending the life of Social Security by creating a system through which affluent Americans who don’t need their benefits could effectively pass them into an account that would then be divided among the more needy.

Phillips said the one common thread in all the things he’s proposed on the campaign trail is a sense of empathy.

“I’ve never walked in the shoes of any Black person, of any Latino person or any gay person, of any Indian, Muslim or Christian person. I’ve only walked in my shoes,” he said. “Empathy means taking a moment to think about what life might be like for somebody else.

“I think that is a deeply and uniquely American quality that we need to restore,” he said. “Yes, racism exists, sexism, misogyny exists, Islamophobia exists, antisemitism ... we all know this. So let’s start trying to acknowledge the truth, instead of hiding it.

“The sad thing is, I think some candidates consider it politically expedient to ignore the truth,” he continued. “I will say the quiet part out loud. It may or may not help me win the presidency of the United States of America, because that will depend on whether Americans want to have the quiet part said out loud, but I fully intend to be the president that finally addresses this. I mean, why is it not in America’s best interest to repair the wounds of the past?”

Phillips said he's learned a lot over the past 90 days on the presidential campaign trail.

"Probably because Washington has this really horrible way of just suffocating decency and common sense," he said. "People talk about opening hearts and minds, it actually does the opposite."

Phillips said, just as he did when running for Congress, he began his campaign for the White House by "driving around in my little truck and listening to people."

"And what I've found is that if you just sit down and feed people, have a little coffee and a doughnut, you might actually get together and love each other," he said.

He then began to talk about a series of events he participated in in his home state of Minnesota that were facilitated by the group Braver Angels.

"The sessions were called 'Common Ground' and they involved getting six Democrats and six Republicans to come to a table — usually we'd have lunch or serve some kind of food and we'd just try to get them to know one another," Phillips said.

He explained that a typical session would last about two hours, and the conversation would range over a number of topics.

"It could be health care, immigration, national division ... and then at the end, each participant would get 30 seconds or so just to tell the group what they got out of this experience," Phillips said.

"So at this one session, not that long ago, a young woman named Emily looked across the table at this young man named Dave and said, 'Dave, when you drove up and parked next to me in your F-

150 with the Trump sticker on the bumper, I almost got back in my car and drove away. I just could not imagine sitting at a table with you. But you know what, at the end of the day, I found I like you. And I never thought I'd say that to a Trumper, ever.'"

Phillips said Dave then stood up and admitted he had many of the same feelings.

"‘When I saw your Prius, I wanted to run it over,’ he joked, ‘adding he’d never sat with a progressive and had no idea how much common ground they had.

"‘We both don’t like insurance companies. We both think we should have secure borders. And we’re both concerned about the civil unrest that might occur if we don’t get our act together as a country,’" he said.

At this point, Phillips said, the two participants, without prompting, stood and embraced.

"And I’ll tell you, I don’t know if this career of mine ends in November, if it goes on another four years, or maybe even another eight. But ... that moment, on that night, was my success. That was my mission fulfilled."

He added that he’d love to replicate the experience if he could in the White House.

"John Lewis, who I got to serve with for one term in Congress, was an extraordinary and courageous human being, and he used to say, ‘It doesn’t matter what ship your relatives came in on, we are all in the same boat now.'"

Phillips closed his final events this week by asking his listeners to "change the course of our country."

“Let’s start respecting each other again,” he said, adding, “I would love your vote.”

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