Editor’s note: More people than ever before seem to be seeking the U.S. presidency. Rather than profile alumni who are running for office, we asked Garrett Graff ’03 to talk with two Harvard graduates who have decided to step back from front-line politics—at least for the moment—about the challenges facing the nation and what the 2008 elections may bring.

Baltimore native Kenneth Mehlman, J.D. ’91, sees the complicated politics facing the United States every time he visits his beloved Chesapeake Bay. Once polluted and dying, the bay now teems with boats and aquatic life. “It’s alive,” explains the Karl Rove protégé and former head of the Republican National Committee. “It’s ugly, but oftentimes it works.”

And herein lies an essential conundrum of the early twenty-first century. The Democratic and Republican parties, Mehlman argues, have solved some of the most pressing issues of the last generation, but haven’t yet outlined their future paths. The GOP saw its central mission as defeating the Soviet Union, reducing tax rates and crime, and reforming welfare. Democrats focused on preserving the tenets of the New Deal, protecting the poor, and expanding civil rights. The uncertainty both parties face in forming new goals helps fuel what Mehlman sees as alarming levels of partisanship in Washington. “This ought to be a period of incredible optimism for America,” he adds. “Both parties in their modern form have accomplished what they set out to accomplish. Now they’re fighting, yet there are a lot of new things they have to accomplish.”

As Mehlman sees it, the political focus should be on winning the war against terror and Islamist fascism; achieving energy independence for both environmental and national-security reasons; revamping the healthcare system built during the industrial era; and dealing with the problem of skyrocketing entitlement costs, such as Social Security and Medicare. “Those are four huge challenges that are all amenable to bipartisan consensus,” he says. Whether U.S. leaders will be able to build that consensus is an open question, but one that he works on steadily today.

Mehlman traces his interest in politics to some of his earliest memories. Born in 1966, he came of age under Ronald Reagan; he found inspiration in the former actor and wrote him letters offering advice. After graduating from Franklin and Marshall, on whose board he now sits, Mehlman attended Harvard Law School, where he jokes that he made a lot of enemies when Michael Dukakis’s 1988 presidential campaign engulfed the largely liberal-leaning school.

After law school, he got a job at a Washington, D.C., firm known for its bipartisan ties at the highest levels of politics, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, where he practiced environmental law, specializing in cases in which property lost value because of environmental restrictions. “I’ve always been interested in public service and policy,” he says, “and I wanted to find a place to go that would expose me to a serious law practice and also allow me the chance to serve in government at some point, and this was the perfect place to do that.”

He found, though, that he was spending an increasing amount of time volunteering on political campaigns, including William Weld’s Massachusetts gubernatorial run and George H.W. Bush’s 1992 reelection bid. After only three years at Akin Gump, Mehlman joined the legislative staff of a Texas congressman, the first of several jobs on Capitol Hill. He joined the George W. Bush campaign in 1999 to work in the Iowa caucuses. He was named White House political director after Bush was inaugurated in 2001, and later was tapped to head the 2004 reelection campaign.

Well-known as highly organized, detail-oriented, and “on message” at all times, Mehlman by nearly everyone’s ac-
count put together perhaps the most formidable campaign apparatus ever assembled in American politics. Working closely with Rove, he relied on technology and on pioneering “micro-targeting” work by the GOP—the use of readily available consumer data to locate possible Republican voters. By combining that research with extensive volunteer networks and millions of voter “contacts,” he helped push Bush’s reelection victory total to more popular votes than had ever been cast for a president before. “We built a 1.4-million-volunteer database so that teachers knocked on the doors of teachers to talk about education,” he says. “That’s far more effective than any television ad.”

After the election, he became chair of the Republican National Committee (RNC).

Yet his party was plagued by the wounding war in Iraq, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and repeated corruption scandals in Congress. “The biggest thing I hope [the GOP] learned from ’06 was that we don’t have an entitlement to power,” he asserts. “Campaigns are 5 percent of it. The other 95 percent is what you do in office.” For his part, Mehlman strove to widen the party’s appeal, even convincing Bush to address the annual convention of the NAACP for the first time in his presidency. “We’re too reliant on white guys,” Mehlman explains. “We need to be a party that welcomes all, that goes out of the way to welcome all.” (This philosophy of inclusion may be related to the allegations, heard since his White House career began, that he is gay; Mehlman himself has repeatedly stated that he does not feel obliged to address such questions.)

Earlier this year, he voluntarily stepped down as RNC chair and returned to Akin Gump, mixing private practice and public policy once again. Although neutral thus far in the 2008 presidential race, he’s giving confidential advice to friends on all sides. Two doors down from his office in the firm’s Dupont Circle building is founding partner Robert Strauss, who served as chair of the Democratic Party during the 1970s. Mehlman and Strauss have regularly lunched together in recent years and Mehlman even introduced Strauss to a rising star in the Democratic Party: his law-school classmate Barack Obama.

Just as Mehlman hoped to experience politics and public service when he first arrived at Akin Gump some 15 years ago, much of his work today in both sectors is focused on addressing changes needed for the country’s future. He’s involved in Ed in ’08/Strong American Schools, a non-partisan campaign backed by Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and the Broad and Gates Foundations that will pour $60 million into the 2008 race to focus on education. He’s also working with the Hope Street Group, an organization of business and political leaders focused on creating economic opportunity. There are major challenges ahead, Mehlman says, but nothing that the U.S. political system can’t solve given time, inspiration, and leadership. “Washington will be able to solve these problems”—the question is whether the current people in Washington can,” he asserts. “If they can’t, they’ll be removed and others will.”

Mehlman also sits on the board of the Washington, D.C., Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation, which plans to put a monument to the civil-rights leader on the National Mall, near where King delivered his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech. He cites King as one of the most influential and inspiring leaders of the twentieth century for forcing America to confront its history of racial bigotry. “Our nation was never a perfect nation and still isn’t, but what is so great about America is that we don’t believe we’re perfect,” Mehlman says.

“We realize we constantly have to improve, evolve, and make ourselves better.”

Former Virginia governor Mark Warner, J.D. ’80, has always been a big-ideas guy. After law school, he made a fortune in the emerging cell-phone industry and then spent much of the 1990s as a venture capitalist in northern Virginia’s technology corridor. Today, with the presidential election little more than a year away—and continued speculation that he will be tapped as a vice-presidential nominee—he wants to see some new big ideas. Voters, he says, are looking for “a leader who’s willing to do not the incremental fix, but the big fix, the Rooseveltian fix. They want a leader who won’t be afraid of the future.”

At one time, Warner might just have been that figure. But a year ago he chose not to run for president, placing time with his family—his wife and three teenage daughters—above his political ambition. As he sought the counsel of others who had faced similar decisions, he says he was told, “If you can live with yourself not doing it, you should probably not do it.”Still, stepping back was hard for a man who has always sought to be at the center of political debate—and for whom the current crop of candidates often falls short.

Politics has been Warner’s focus ever since an eighth-grade teacher inspired him to work for social and political change during the turbulent year of 1968.
He grew up in Indiana and Connecticut, but applied only to colleges in Washington, D.C. While attending George Washington University (he was the first in his family to graduate from college), he interned on Capitol Hill, riding his bike over early in the morning to open mail for a series of Connecticut representatives.

Next came Harvard Law School (HLS), where classmates remember him as everybody’s friend and where he was recruited to coach the school’s first women’s intramural basketball team. The school for him was less about lawyering—he jokes that he was not a natural lawyer and so was the only member of his class not to receive a job offer from either firm he worked for one summer—and much more about forming friendships. “Our class was more cohesive than others, and in part that was really Mark’s influence,” explains Helen Marinak Blohm, J.D. ’80, who played on that basketball team. “He would often be the one planning the party, getting the group together, or doing social things that made us seem more connected to each other.” To this day, some of his closest friends, including top adviser Howard Gutman, now a partner at Williams & Connolly, are old HLS classmates.

Back in Washington after graduation, working for the Democratic National Committee as a fundraiser, Warner observed the plight of candidates burdened by large campaign debts and decided to secure his financial future before entering public life. His first two ventures failed, but his third, buying and trading spectrum licenses—the airwaves upon which cell-phone calls are transmitted—earned him an estimated $200 million.

His reentry into politics, managing a gubernatorial bid for Virginia’s Douglas Wilder, came just months after he nearly died of a burst appendix while he and his wife, Lisa Collis, were on their honey-moon in 1989. Wilder won the race and Warner took over the state party, making more friends and building a network that launched him into the 1996 U.S. Senate race against the popular Republican incumbent, John Warner. Warner versus Warner was not particularly close, but Warner still laughs about the time he was campaigning in southern Virginia with signs that read “Mark not John,” and a driver pulled over to ask, “Is that a biblical reference?”

Following the loss, Warner retired to his Alexandria venture-capital firm, Columbia Capital, and got involved in projects around the state that kept his contacts and networks alive for another campaign. Among other things, he set up programs to help students learn computer skills and, as the dot-com boom of the late 1990s took off in Northern Virginia, he developed a website to help senior citizens navigate healthcare choices.

In 2001, stepping into a political void, Warner ran for governor at a time when Democrats did not hold a single statewide office. To the surprise of nearly everyone, he won by a narrow margin, thanks to aggressive outreach to sportsmen and rural Virginians in the southwestern corner of the state, where he was helped by a bluegrass theme song and a NASCAR truck sponsorship. The nation was grappling with the recent shock of September 11; Warner had watched the Pentagon burn from the roof of his campaign headquarters.

Because Virginia allows its governors to run again, but not to succeed themselves, Warner knew from the moment he entered office that the clock was ticking down on his four-year term. He confronted a softening economy and financial chaos, including a state deficit that soared from $700 million to $3.8 billion. He soon became known as the “Power-Point governor” for his tireless jawboning across the state with charts, graphs, and presentations. His efforts resulted in a budget deal with the Republican-dominated legislature that raised taxes and added reforms to close the deficit without severe budget cuts. The money, he asserted, preserved the state’s coveted AAA bond rating and paved the way for record-setting investment in the state’s K-12 educational system.

By the time he left office in 2006 (leaving matters to his hand-picked successor, Timothy Kaine), Warner was wildly popular across the state. He had helped to install a massive broadband network for rural areas and to revitalize the state’s economy and government; during his
Justice, On Line

Starting September 19, alumni around the world can log onto one of the College’s most popular courses: Moral Reasoning 22, “Justice,” with Bass professor of government Michael J. Sandel. This unprecedented, distance-learning project was organized by the Harvard Alumni Association (HAA). “Justice Online” offers webstreamed video of the semester-long course (24 lectures) from last year, which may be viewed at home, along with “interactive elements, including an on-line discussion blog, in-person discussion groups in cities around the world, and, we hope, some video-linked discussions among alumni participants and Harvard College students taking ‘Justice’ here in Cambridge,” Sandel notes.”If the technology works, we may be one step closer to creating a global classroom.”

For further information on the course and information about registration, visit http://post.harvard.edu/-sandel. In Boston, the HAA plans to launch the first class with Sandel in person at “Justice Online: Reconnect with Harvard” on September 19 at Sanders Theatre. A second, similar event with Sandel is also planned for September 27 at the Harvard Club of New York. For further details, visit the website or call 617-495-1093.

More than 20 alumni clubs are participating, including those in Australia, Mexico, India, and Hong Kong. “It’s like taking a class together throughout the world,” says Philip Lovejoy, the HAA’s director of University alumni affairs. “It’s also an experiment, and it will be interesting to see what kind of response we get.”

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