

Never Trumpers Never Had A Chance

Animosity Proved Stronger Than Character Or Ideology

By David French, Opinion Columnist
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The Republican Presidential Primary Is All But Over. Even If Nikki Haley Stays In The Race, It's Hard To See Her Winning A Single Primary, Including The One In Her Home State Of South Carolina Next Month. Even Though Haley Received An Impressive 43 Percent Of The New Hampshire Vote, Her Electoral Reality Is Grim. According To The Most Recent FiveThirtyEight Polling Averages, She Trails Donald Trump By More Than 56 Points Nationally And By 37 Points In South Carolina.

It's déjà vu All Over Again. Since The Moment Trump Took The GOP Primary Lead In 2015, He's Never Relinquished His Hold On The Party. And Since Trump's Hostile Takeover And Unexpected 2016 Victory, The GOP Has Also Experienced Consistent Losses. Democrats Seized The House From Republicans In 2018. They Took The Presidency And The Senate In 2020. In Those Two Elections, The Democrats Accomplished A Political Feat Not Seen Since The Herbert Hoover Era: Winning The House, Senate And White House In A Single Four-Year Span.

And The Democrats' Success Didn't Stop There. In 2022, Despite Political Conditions That Should Have Been Overwhelmingly Favorable To Republicans, Democrats Made A Modest Gain In The Senate And Barely Lost The Closely Divided House. Election-Denying MAGA Candidates Were Routed In Multiple Swing-State Elections. Yet None Of Those Setbacks Broke Trump's Grip On The GOP.

This Is In Part Because While Democrats Have Been Able To Mobilize An Effective Anti-Trump Opposition, Conservative Never Trumpets — Republicans And Former Republicans Like Me Who Have Desperately Tried To Break Trump's Grip On The Party — Mostly Failed. It's Now Clear To Me That We Never Had A Chance. And The Reason Is Equally Clear: **We Did Not Truly Understand Our Own Party.**

To Appreciate Our Confusion (And Our Mistakes), Let's Go Back To The *Before Times*, To The Year 2014. Back Then, I Was A Stalwart Republican Working For A Conservative Christian Law Firm. If You Had Asked Me To Describe The Republican Party, I Would Have Answered Something Like This: At Our Best, We Are A Party That Possesses A Distinct Conservative Ideology And A ***Commitment To Character.***

The Ideology Revolved Around The Three Legs Of The Reagan Republican Stool: Limited Government, Social Conservatism And A Strong National Defense. The Commitment To Character Was Born Out Of The Political Conflicts Of The Clinton Years, In Which Conservatives Were Furious That Democrats Were Willing To Overlook Or Rationalize Disgraceful And Unlawful Behavior By Bill Clinton. No One Would Claim That Ever Conservative Had Character — We've Seen Far Too Many Scandals To Believe That — But I Refused To Believe That The GOP Would Broadly Excuse, Rationalize Or Defend A Bill Clinton In Our Midst.

I Wasn't Just Wrong; I Was Completely, Embarrassingly Wrong. The Winds Were Shifting. I Could Sense It, But I Didn't Fully Understand It. Not Until Trump Made It All Plain. The Salient Characteristic Of The Republican Party Wasn't Ideology Or Integrity, Let Alone Both. **Rather, It Was Animosity. And Nodody Models Animosity Better Than Donald Trump.**

In 2014, The Pew Research Center Published A Fascinating, Comprehensive Examination Of American Political Attitudes, And The Conclusion Was Sobering: "Republicans And Democrats Are More Divided Along Ideological Lines — And Partisan Antipathy Is Deeper And More Extensive — Than At Any Point In The Last Two Decades." I Remember Seeing The Study When It Was Published, But I Didn't Truly Understand Its Import. Again, Until Donald Trump.

There Had Been Previous Republican Leaders Who Had Projected Animosity And Displayed Questionable Character, With Newt Gingrich Being Perhaps The Preeminent Example. But They Had Also Been Orthodox Conservatives In Terms Of Ideology. What I Did Not Know Until Trump Was Which Value Or Values — Conservative Ideology, Personal Character Or Animosity Toward Democrats — Dominated The Hearts And Minds Of Republican Voters. Trump Appealed To Animosity, But He Was Also The Least Ideologically Orthodox Republican To Run For President In My Adult Lifetime, With By Far The Most Dubious Character.

He Derided The Iraq War, Complimented Planned Parenthood, Celebrated War Crimes, Advocated Trade Wars And Lived — And Publicly Boasted — Of An Extravagantly Libertine Life. Reviewing Old Essays By Conservatives Opposed To Trump, The Most Persistent Complaint Was Simple: The Man Wasn't A "Real" Conservative. At The same Time, Others Among Us Remembered The Christian Conservative Outcry Against Clinton's Infidelity, And Believed That An Argument About Character Would Pull Believers Away From Trump's Grasp.

But No. When Ideology And Character Conflicted With Partisan Pugilism, A Critical Mass Of The GOP Chose Pugilism. When Trump Shocked The World And Won — Beating Hillary Clinton, The Politician Whom Republican Voters May Have Despised Longer And More Deeply Than Any Democrat, Other Than Perhaps Her Husband — The Bond With Trump Was Sealed.

If Animosity Toward Democrats Was The Primary Republican Value, Even More Than Ideology Or Character, You Can See How Never Trumpers Were Destined To Fail. Obviously, The Plurality Of Republican Voters Who Truly Love Donald Trump (Including Many Who Came To The Party *Because Of* Donald Trump) Would Reject Never Trump Arguments. The True Disappointment Has Been Our Failure To Reach Republicans Who Are *Not* Ardent Trump Supporters, The Legions Of Skeptical Voters Who Will Tell Anyone Who Listens That There Are Things They Really Don't Like About Him, But Then Will Vote For Him Anyway.

The Central Problem Is That When Animosity Toward Democrats Is The Primary Value, Any Critique Of Trump Has To End The Instant It's Perceived To Help Or Signal Agreement With Democrats. Impeach Trump? Not In Cooperation With Democrats. Indict Trump? Not If That's What Democrats Want. Any Opposition To Trump Is Too Much Opposition If Democrats Agree With It.

Thus, The Only Conservative Critiques Of Trump That Are Grudgingly Permitted Are Critiques Of His Effectiveness. If There's One Thing We Know Democrats *Don't* Want, After All, It's Someone Who's Just Like Trump But Better At It. That's Why Most MAGA People Will Likely Welcome Ron DeSantis And His Supporters Back Into The Fold. The Florida Governor's Core Critique Was That Trump Simply Wasn't As Good At Defeating Democrats And Punishing Progressives As He Was.

You Can See The Conundrum. If You Express Hatred For Democrats, You Can Bond Yourself With The GOP Base. But If You Disagree With Democrats And Also Critique Trump's Character Or His Policies, Then His Voters Are Confused. How Can You Disagree With Democrats *And* Help Democrats. Don't You Know That's Exactly What You're Doing? Keep Your Complaints To Yourself. Don't Give The Other Side Any Ammunition.

Last Summer, My Colleague Nate Cohn [Published Poll Results](#) Showing That The MAGA Base Was A Mere 37 Percent Of The GOP And Another 37 Percent Were "Persuadable." But I Have Experience With These Persuadable Voters, And They Are Highly Negatively Polarized Against Democrats And The Left. I Think Of The [Recent Politico Profile](#) Of A Trump Supporter Named Ted Johnson. He Claimed He Had Been Open To Nikki Haley At One Point, Rendering Him Allegedly "Persuadable." But He Also Believes Jan 6 Was "Patriots' Day" And That Trump Needs To Break The American System And Pull The Country Apart.

Those Are The “Persuadable” Trump Voters I Know — People Who Might Be Willing To Consider Someone Else, But At The End Of The Day Come Home To Trump In Part Because They See His Rage A Mirror Of Their Own. They Know Trump Understands What Time It is.

One Of The Sobering Realities Of Life Is That We Often Don’t Understand Our True Hierarchy Of Values Until They Come Into Conflict. We Might Say, For Example, That We Believe That Our Political Leaders Should Be Men Or Women Of High Character Who Broadly Agree With Our Policy Positions. But Do We Believe That At The Cost Of Actually Losing A Political Race. **Or Is Victory The Necessity, And Character And Ideology The Luxuries?**

I Don’t Regret My Arguments Against Trump. I’d Make Them Again, And I Will Continue Making Them. I Do Ask Myself How I Missed The Sheer Extent Of Republican Anger. And I’m Deeply, Deeply Grieved By The thought That I Did Anything In My Life Before Trump To Contribute To That Unrighteous Rage. Animosity Is The Enemy Of Liberty And Unity. Before Republicans Can Reject Trump Or End Trump-*jism*, They’ll Have To Ease The Anger That Dominates Far Too Many Right-Wing Hearts.

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