

Are ‘Never Trumpers’ the Future of the GOP?

Denouncing the \$900 billion COVID-19 relief bill as a parsimonious “disgrace” and hinting at an Alamo-style finish on Jan. 6, when Congress votes to declare Joe Biden the next president, Donald Trump is not going to go quietly.

The anti-Trumpers and “Never Trumpers” celebrating at Christmas 2020, in this “dark winter” of Joe Biden’s depiction, are assuring each other that Trumpism and Trump are dead and gone for good in four weeks. The future of the GOP, they suggest, belongs to the Republicans who resisted and renounced Trump through the last five years of his candidacy and presidency. As for those cowards and collaborators who stood by Trump and refused to repudiate him, they will, in turn, be repudiated by history and the American electorate alike. The wish, here, is very much the father to the thought.

For if the past is any guide, not only are the reports of the death of Trumpism premature, the probability is that Trumpism has put down roots in our national politics that are not soon, if ever, going to be pulled up.

For those of us of a certain age, a comparable situation arose at Christmas 1964. Barry Goldwater had just been crushed in a 44-state landslide, winning the votes of only 27 million Americans. The senator had carried only five states of the Deep South and his home state of Arizona. The establishment saw in the crushing of Goldwater the defeat and rout of the “extremist” movement that had produced him. “The Party That Lost Its Head” was the title of a widely hailed post-election book by two Ripon Society Republicans.

The establishment consensus was that Govs. Nelson Rockefeller

of New York, William Scranton of Pennsylvania and George Romney of Michigan were the future of the party, if it was to have a future. What followed?

Richard Nixon, who had stood by Goldwater when the party's liberal elite abandoned him, would lead the GOP to recapture 47 House seats in 1966, take the presidency in 1968, and run up a 49-state landslide in 1972. Thus began a period of GOP presidential ascendancy, with Nixon, Reagan, and Bush I winning five of six elections from 1968 to 1988, until the first baby boomer president, Bill Clinton, arrived on the scene. And while there are differences between now and then, there are many similarities.

Do the anti-Trumpers or "Never Trumpers" represent the future of the GOP? If so, where is the postwar precedent for this? No Republican who turned his back on Goldwater was ever nominated for president or vice president following Goldwater's defeat. When President Gerald Ford put Rockefeller on his ticket after taking over from President Nixon, the Kansas City convention of 1976 demanded Rockefeller's removal as the price of party unity. Rockefeller was sacrificed, as the right had demanded. Four years after Ford's defeat, Mr. Conservative himself, Ronald Reagan, Goldwater's most effective surrogate in 1964, was nominated and won successive landslides in 1980 and 1984.

Other factors and forces point to the probability that Trumpism has a major role in the party's future.

Where Presidents Truman, Nixon, and George W. Bush left office with approval ratings in the 20s, Trump's approval rating is still in the 40s, where it has been for the duration of his presidency. Second, the issues that propelled Trump to the nomination and the Oval Office still resonate with the American people. Among them are mass migration, insecure borders, and dependency upon foreign imports for the necessities of our national life.

Moreover, there is shrinking support for a foreign policy that has us tied down militarily in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East, to fight if need be, in the defense of scores of nations, few of which have a direct bearing on the national security of the United States. Another issue Trump elevated and exploited that is more acute now than in 2016, is a distrust of the media, the “deep state,” and the political, cultural, and academic establishments that have alienated the 74 million who voted for Trump.

And if the past is prologue, the Republican Party will make a major comeback in 2022.

Consider. Two years after his smashing victory over Goldwater, LBJ and his party lost 47 House seats. Ronald Reagan, after his landslide in 1980, lost 26 House seats in 1982. After routing Bush I in 1992, Bill Clinton lost 54 House seats and the Senate. Two years after winning the presidency, Barack Obama lost both the House and Senate in 2014. Is it likely Joe Biden will be celebrating his 80th birthday after making history by leading his party to control of Congress in 2022?

For Republicans, the nomination of 2024 is a prize to be sought. However, if one has spent the last four years trashing Trump, it may be as out of reach as it was for Rocky.

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