Opinion



People demonstrate their opinions about then-candidate Donald Trump at a rally in Waukesha, Wisconsin, Sept. 28, 2016. (Flickr/WisPolitics.com)



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How should we treat converts? No, not converts to Catholicism. We welcome them, although we urge them to silence when they start insinuating the pope isn't Catholic while their heads are still wet from the baptismal font. (Yes, I mean you Matthew Schmitz!) Today, let's look at newly minted Sen. Mitt Romney, whose purportedly "bold" op-ed criticizing President Donald Trump caused a stir last week, and at other Republicans who are starting to position themselves near the exit doors of this dreadful presidency.

It is true, as Romney writes, that "the president has not risen to the mantle of the office." The junior senator from Utah is right that "a presidency shapes the public character of the nation" and that "with the nation so divided, resentful and angry, presidential leadership in qualities of character is indispensable." What Romney is really saying is that Trump should be more like Romney, except that Romney never made it to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. because he was not sufficiently like Trump. Besides, I seem to recall Romney saying something about 47 percent of Americans being "takers," the kind of social Darwinian language that surely helped pave the way for Trump's ascendency. That language and moral logic was long familiar to Romney's running mate, Paul Ryan, who was once the darling of the Catholic right, including many hierarchs.

Last month, at the time of the death of former President George H.W. Bush, there was a similar need to point out that as much as Bush differed from Trump, in some significant way he paved the way.

I also called attention to Carlos Lozada's brilliant review — and takedown — of four books by "Never Trump" conservatives. Lozada concluded that "In a sense, the Never Trumpers are also the Only Trumpers. Only with the rise of Trump did they even think to interrogate the conservative dogma they'd long defended. Only with Trump did they begin to reconsider their roles in feeding a frenzied base. Only with Trump did they see the need to reach for higher ideals." And, in one of the most felicitous turns of phrase I encountered all year, he wrote of the Never Trumpers that "they often falter when reckoning with their own role, witting or not, in what came to pass. If conservatism has been hijacked by Trump, as they argue, who left it so vulnerable? These writers pose the question, but their answers feel like mere feints at accountability, more meh culpa than mea culpa." Oh, how I wish I had come

up with "meh culpa."

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Journalists are supposed to be writing the first draft of history, so it is important that we note the inconsistencies, the convenient eliding of important facts, the sequences of events, often complex but determinative, that are the warp and weft of that history. But how should the public consider these would-be converts? Should they demand some kind of authentic mea culpa before re-admittance to polite company? And how should political opponents view these men and women who, as it were, seek to swim the Potomac?

In his op-ed, Romney explains the many points of agreement on policy with the president. "He [Trump] was right to align U.S. corporate taxes with those of global competitors, to strip out excessive regulations, to crack down on China's unfair trade practices, to reform criminal justice and to appoint conservative judges," Romney observes. "These are policies mainstream Republicans have promoted for years." He still does not get it. What he calls an effort to "align U.S. corporate taxes with those of our global competitors" is precisely the kind of betrayal of the working class that led to Trump's ascendency. What is different between Romney and Trump, then, is that Trump promised to fight for the working class — "The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer" he said in his inaugural address — and then betrayed them, whereas Romney advertised in advance that he did not consider them worth his attention. Romney is not saying he does not want Trump in the presidency, only that he does not want him in his club.

Conversions must be as public and specific as were the commitments that are being abandoned. Otherwise, it is mere posturing. Romney has not fallen off his horse, he is just looking for the exits in case the Trump administration explodes. The "Never Trump" crowd must engage in a real wrestling with their conservative creed if they are to propose a revivified version of it, a version that must explain how it is now inoculated from the Trump heresy and is contrite about the failure to see the need for such inoculation before. And, obviously, these demanding requirements pertain only to those who are in the public eye. Your neighbor who voted for Trump because she wanted a change can be welcomed without any public shaming.

I want us to welcome converts, not bar them. But those in public life must make a public act of contrition and publicly demonstrate their firm purpose of amendment.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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