Opinion

News



SS American Star (originally the SS America, 1939) seen in 2004 from Fuerteventura, Canary Islands where it wrecked in 1995 (Wikimedia Commons/Wollex)

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Last month, at FiveThirtyEight, political scientist Lee Drutman speculated that President Donald Trump's outlandish decision to have police clear protesters from Lafayette Park so he could take a photo-op in front of St. John's Episcopal Church might be the tipping point, causing other Republicans to break with the president. Drutman thought such a break was unlikely but made the point that if it were to happen, it would likely happen suddenly.

Drutman was right: A break is unlikely.

Certain Republican governors, such as Florida's Ron DeSantis and Texas' Greg Abbott, have begun to distance themselves functionally from the president, even while they do not rhetorically step away from him. Abbott's popularity is sinking fast because he, like Trump, sought a hasty reopening, lifted the "stay-at-home" order in April, and did not take the necessary precautions to reopen safely. He has since halted the reopening process and ordered all bars closed.

In Florida, DeSantis is sticking closer to the president, pushing for schools to reopen, but regularly urging people to wear masks and practice social distancing while the president continues to send mixed messages. And, in a recent press conference, DeSantis mimicked the president's rosy outlook.

"I think the trend is much better today than it was two weeks ago," he said, despite the fact that dozens of hospitals in the state have maxed out their intensive care unit beds. He is now being criticized for following the president, but there is very little reason for him to publicly break with Trump.

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Unlike Abbott and DeSantis, who will not be on the ballot this November, Senate Republicans are increasingly nervous that Trump's tanking poll numbers could imperil their majority in the upper chamber. Already, GOP donors are beginning to redirect their money away from the president's reelection effort and toward embattled Republican senators.

"As Republicans get more and more in tune, it's hold the Senate at all costs," Dan K. Eberhart told The New York Times. The energy executive and major Republican donor continued, "The House is gone. And the White House is looking increasingly like an uphill battle. This is not a good picture for us."

Candidates are focusing more on their own records and not so much on their ties with the White House. A survey of 37,000 ads run by the five most endangered Republican senators showed that only 5% contained a pro-Trump message.

Attorney General William Barr, profiled yesterday here at NCR by John Gehring, shows no signs of breaking with this lawless president. After telling the Senate Judiciary Committee during his confirmation hearing that it would be a crime for the president to pardon someone in exchange for their pledge not to incriminate him, Barr intervened in the case of Roger Stone to lower the sentencing recommendation, after Stone was found guilty of several felonies. Barr reportedly recommended that the president not grant any form of clemency to Stone. The president did it anyway. If Barr is not going to resign over that, he is never going to resign.

Department of Homeland Security Acting Deputy Secretary Ken Cuccinelli is the latest Trump administration official to be put on the hot seat. He tried dismissing concerns about police state tactics when video showed camouflage-wearing federal agents take a protester in Portland, Oregon, and put him into an unmarked van, saying such actions are "so common it's barely worth discussion." He called the protests "terrorism."

That was before federal — What to call them? Troops? Agents? — deployed tear gas against a "wall of moms" who had gathered to protect the protesters. The headline at Rolling Stone said it all: "From the Administration that Brought You Kids-in-Cages, It's Tear-Gassed Moms."

I remember the congressional debates about establishing the Department of Homeland Security. I do not recall discussion of sending them into American cities to defend statuary or shoot tear gas against peacefully protesting mothers.

Mindful that columnists are ill-advised to make predictions, I will venture one anyway: Fox News will be the last to jump ship.

Not to jinx it, but voters are abandoning Trump. The latest NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll registered 50% "strongly disapprove" of the president's job

performance.Voters who "strongly" approve or disapprove are very hard to swing the other way, and, usually, at this stage in a race, an incumbent wants to be at a 50% approval rate. If that is not incentive enough for other Republican office holders to jump ship, nothing is.

When a part of a dam bursts, it is next to impossible to shore up the structure while water continues to put pressure on the flaw, and it is usually only a matter of time before the whole thing comes crashing down. It is different in politics. No GOP officeholder, recall, followed Sen. Mitt Romney in supporting the president's removal from office during the impeachment trial in January. For now, Trump's support among GOP officeholders is staying in place, so even if a Senate candidate here or a Republican governor there breaks ranks, and does so quietly, the party is still his party. Ergo, when the whole thing comes crashing down, those supporters are likely to be washed down the valley with him. It won't be pretty. It also will not be a moment too soon.

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

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