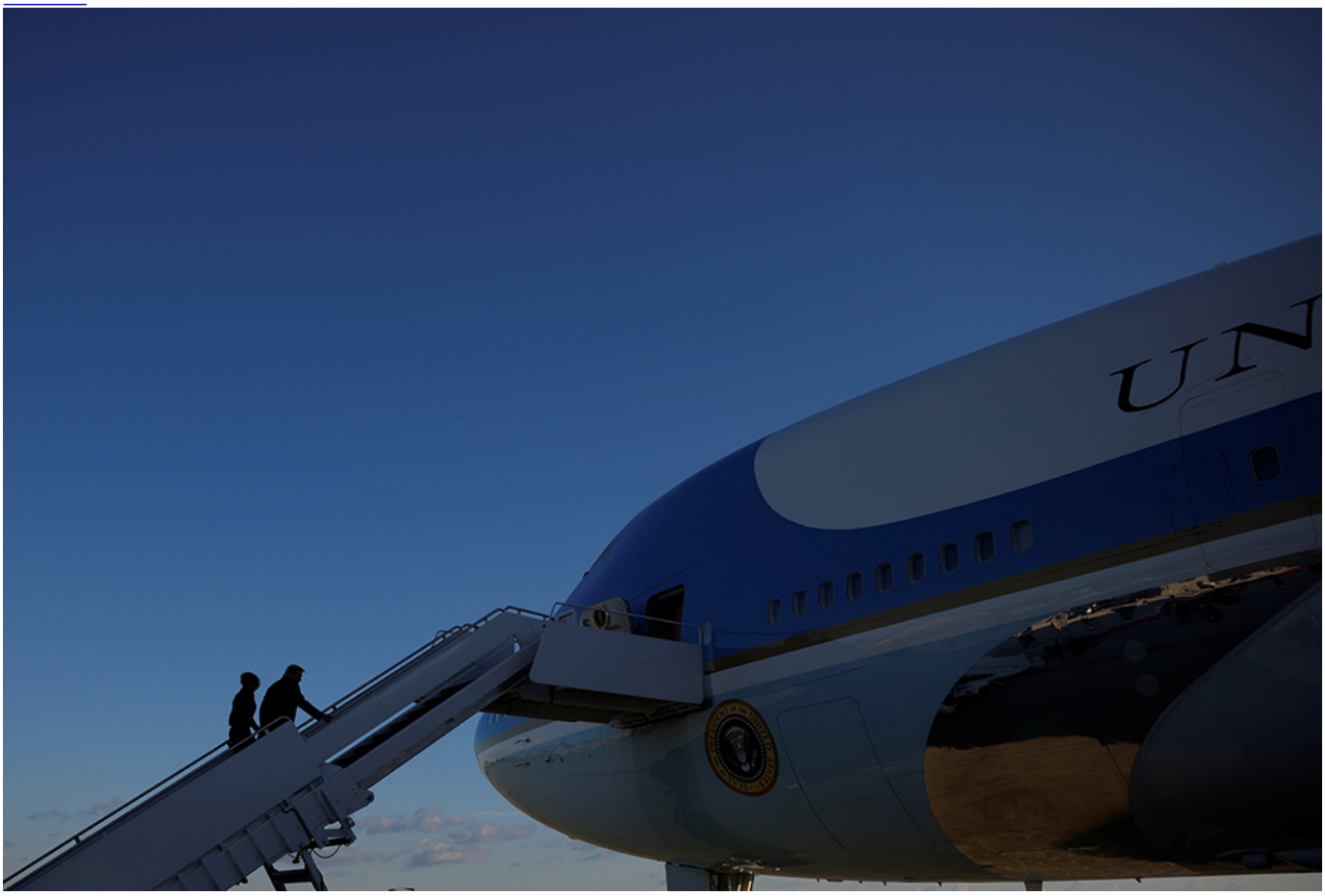
Opinion

News



Then-President Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump depart Joint Base Andrews in Maryland Jan. 20, ahead of then-President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration. (CNS/Carlos Barria, Reuters)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

May 7, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

In the 14th century, the papacy was exiled for 68 years (1309-77) at Avignon, France. In many ways, the leadership of the Catholic Church continued to function normally: Bishops received their apostolic mandates, diplomatic relations were maintained, papal bulls were issued as needed, cardinals were created and conclaves were conducted. Six popes followed Clement V in taking up residence at the Papal Palace along the banks of the Rhone, and the legal title to that palace was clearly in the pope's name, as surely as the Lateran or Vatican palaces. The influence of the French king was profound but not total; still the spiritual strength of the church was subservient to the political interests of France.

Yet, the Avignon papacy was built on a big lie: The pope leads the church because he is the bishop of Rome, and whatever else the Avignon popes were, they were not the bishops of Rome in any meaningful way.

Today's Republican Party has chosen to mimic the 14th-century papacy. The mundane tasks of running a political party continue as before: Fundraising emails are dispatched, polls are taken, members of Congress meet to discuss legislative strategies, candidates are recruited for next year's midterm elections.

But a big lie has emerged at the heart of the party — that Donald Trump is really the legitimate president because the 2020 election was stolen — and until that lie is dispatched, the leaders of the party must make their pilgrimages to Mar-a-Lago, as once bishops had to travel to Avignon to receive the papal blessing. Until that lie is dispatched, whatever growth the party enjoys will be unnatural and unwholesome. Until that lie is dispatched, American democracy is radically unsafe.



US Rep. Liz Cheney is pictured in a 2019 photo (Lance Cheung/USDA)

The analogy works but, like all analogies, it is not exhaustive. For example, it is true that Trump expects obedience to a degree unheard of in American presidential politics, but far more akin to the obedience medieval popes expected when supplicants kissed their ring or their foot. On the other hand, the analogy fails because spiritual regeneration sometimes flowers in the face of political oppression, while I can think of no instance in human history when the political life of a democratic nation flourished when overwhelmed by policies and politics driven by personal or dynastic agendas.

One of the Avignon popes, Benedict XII, had worked in the inquisition ferreting out the principal heretics of his day, the Cathars. To be sure, the Cathars really were heretics! Today, it is Congresswoman Liz Cheney who is being hounded out of her position as conference chair, the No. 3 leadership post in the Republican caucus. Her crime is that she fails to repeat the lie and, instead, rightly warns her colleagues that it is a lie with grave potential to harm the country and well as their party.

"The Republican Party is at a turning point, and Republicans must decide whether we are going to choose truth and fidelity to the Constitution," she wrote in The Washington Post on Wednesday.

Mind you, I cannot imagine a set of circumstances in which I would vote to elect Cheney to office: Her positions on basic issues are very different from mine. But her positions are those that have characterized the Republican Party for 40 years. She is no Cathar. She is unwilling to live a lie, a destructive and dangerous lie. Her politics are still traditional conservative bunk, but such differences are the stuff of politics.

It is more than a little interesting that the leading Catholic Republican in the House leadership, U.S. Rep. Steve Scalise, has called for Cheney's ouster. Scalise knows Trump lost. He and GOP Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy know that a majority of their fellow Republicans representatives also understand that Cheney is widely respected in the caucus: In February, GOP house members voted to retain Cheney in her leadership post on a secret ballot vote of 145-61.

What changed? Scalise and McCarthy want to be able to head down to Mar-a-Lago and tell the Republican don that they have taken care of the family's rival. They emerge from their meetings with the former president — or like Sen. Ted Cruz, tweet a photo having dinner with him — like Michael Corleone emerging from the church after the baptism. The next time Scalise mounts the rostrum at the annual March for Life and talks about his commitment to the truth about the human person, bring me a barf bag.

Advertisement

Cheney is not entirely alone. Sen. Mitt Romney will receive the "Profile in Courage" award from the John F. Kennedy Library at a ceremony later this month. Romney is being honored because he was the first senator in history to vote to impeach a

president of his own party. Romney's politics, like Cheney's, are not mine, but as an American and as a believer in an almighty God, I could not but be moved by his speech on the floor of the Senate announcing his decision to vote to impeach Trump. That speech really did thrust the Utah senator into the ranks of those members of Congress Kennedy profiled in his 1956 book.

Cheney and Romney will not be given an audience in Mar-a-Lago anytime soon, and good for them. To watch the other Republican cardinals trek down to the modern-day Avignon in West Palm Beach, prostrating themselves so as to kiss the slipper of their master, it is grotesque. They have forgotten that prostration before an idol invariably leads to intellectual prostitution, and thence to moral turpitude.

The people of late-medieval Christendom, despite the political subjugation of their religious leaders, still raised their minds to the heavens — and their masons raised magnificent temples that still mesmerize us, from Giotto's bell tower in Florence to Exeter Cathedral in England to St. Mary's Basilica in Krakow, all built during the papal exile in Avignon. Obsequium is a religious virtue after all.

Obsequium is not a political virtue. Trump and his sycophants, however, build nothing, they only destroy, and they revel in calling themselves disruptors. If the Republican Party followed Cheney and Romney, our politics today would be about policy choices. Instead, it is about legitimacy, about whether and how our democracy may endure. It is about whether the big lie will win. It is about a once great party deciding to abscond to Avignon.