Opinion

NCR Voices



Former U.S. President Donald Trump speaks during the Conservative Political Action Conference at Gaylord National Convention Center March 4 in National Harbor, Maryland. (OSV News/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)



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This is America, the land of second acts. Even Richard Nixon, having lost to Jack Kennedy in 1960, came back to win the White House in 1968 and, having later resigned in disgrace, still managed to insert himself into public debate as an elder statesman at times and after a suitable interval. Everyone gets to reinvent themselves in America. Here, you do not have to be an evangelical Christian to be born again.

Believing in the redemption of sinners and the grace of the confessional, I have long thought that this generous American habit of reinvention is a wonderful thing, an openness to grace in an often cold and judgmental culture. In most instances it is wonderful. There are some times, however, when it is right and proper for a person to give an account of themselves, to be able to point to the spot where they fell from the horse on the road to Damascus, demonstrate that something more than convenience is at work, especially when their second act has public ramifications. In the absence of an apologia, skepticism is appropriate.

So, when we read certain conservatives these days as they try — yet again — to rid their party of the moral stain of Donald Trump, it is a time to be wary.



Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis speaks at the Republican Party of Florida Night Watch Party during the primary election, in Hialeah, Florida, in this Aug. 23, 2022, file photo. (CNS/Reuters/Marco Bello)

The latest example of an all-too convenient distancing from Trump came from the pen of National Review editor Rich Lowry, whose essay at Politico last week examined the former president's labeling Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis a "RINO," or "Republican In Name Only." Lowry observed that, "Records aren't kept on such things, but Trump is clearly the most promiscuous user of 'RINO' in Republican Party history. He applies it to everyone from Republicans who now have a genuinely strained connection to the party, like Liz Cheney, to stand-out governors like [Florida Gov. Ron] DeSantis and Brian Kemp of Georgia."

Lowry adds that RINO was never "a precise term. Once upon a time, it was an acronym applied to moderate Republicans who accommodated the other side on substance and process. In recent years, though, Trump has appropriated it as completely as the phrase 'fake news.' "

What Lowry is trying to do here is paint the picture of a post-Trump party without the shadow and stain of the former president. But Trump was not the standard bearer of the party in the manner of Mitt Romney or the Bushes, *pere* and *fils*. Trump remade the GOP in his own image.

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It is an open question whether someone like DeSantis could become a contender had Trump not paved the way. They may be different in some regards, but they both embody the anti-elite populism that is the defining characteristic of the GOP today. If fiscal conservatism was the hallmark of Republicanism in the postwar era, and neoliberalism its distinguishing mark in the Reagan and Bush years, today it is anti-elite populism that most characterizes the party.

In 2018, Lowry was singing a different tune. "Indeed, most of the fears of how Trump would conduct himself in office have been realized (everyone would have thought Jeb Bush was crazy if he had predicted a President Trump would fire a high-level Cabinet official via Twitter, and not even using direct message)," he wrote back then. "Yet it doesn't follow that we should buy into the fantasy either that Trump is going to disappear into thin air, or that Trumpism can be blithely dismissed so the party can return to what some Never Trumpers believe constituted the status quo ante."

Lowry in 2018 was a lot more accurate than he is today. The most important stance a GOP leader must figure out is not their position on Ukraine or the debt ceiling. It is how deeply they want to submerge themselves into the cult of Donald Trump.

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How else to explain the decision by Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy to meet with Micki Witthoeft, the mother of Ashli Babbitt who was killed during the Jan. 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol. Only last month, Trump criticized McCarthy for defending the Capitol Police officer who shot Babbitt during the riot.

Politics is filled with tough calls. Assessing what happened on Jan. 6, 2021, is not one of them.

Political parties are always developing. The party of Lincoln became the party of the robber barons in the late 19th century, and of Reagan in the late 20th century. Now it is the party of Trump. And there isn't enough soap in the world.