

GOP Delusions of Trumpism Without Trump

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by Conrad Black

The American political community is in a brief hiatus between the Democrats' surprisingly good midterm results and the opening of the launch season for the presidential aspirants of both parties. There is a good deal of agitation among the Democrats that the president should not seek reelection and a number of recent developments, including the ludicrous imbroglio over improper retention of classified documents, indicate that the powers behind the scenes in that party are scheming to ease their leader out. In this context it was hard to know what to make of the lachrymose and almost incoherent

retirement address of President Biden's chief of staff, Ron Klain.

Among traditional Republicans, there is another tentative flirtation with hopefulness that the Trump phenomenon is passing. There have been a number of those since Senator McConnell promised to "drop him like a hot rock" in early 2016. He was steadily underestimated as he racked up primary victories in that year and had almost no support from Republican governors or members of the Congress in the 2016 campaign, which he was almost universally expected to lose. When he did lose in 2020 most of the traditional Republicans heaved a sigh of relief and imagined they could take all of Mr. Trump's popularity and program and dispense with him.

The eminent Republican strategist Karl Rove, without whom President George W. Bush would never have been known outside Texas, holds to the traditional Never Trumper view that he is, as Mr. Rove's piece in the Wall Street Journal was [headlined](#) on February 2, "The GOP's Albatross." He makes the points that Mr. Trump is "well-known, sure, but also overexposed. His shtick is old, his speeches boring. More and more Republicans want to turn the page: only 31 percent in the December 11 USA Today/Suffolk University poll wanted him to run again." He acknowledges that Trump leads most of the polls for Republican support but points out that frontrunners at this stage have often flamed out in the past.

This is the updated version of what Mr. Rove and less distinguished anti-Trump Republicans have been saying since Trump came down the escalator at the Trump Tower in June, 2015. The "Albatross" is also the most popular member of the Republican Party and past front-runners who have faded have not included any ex-presidents since U.S. Grant, and the majority of Republicans believe, probably correctly, that Mr. Trump would be the president today if the voting and vote-counting rules had not been unconstitutionally changed in six or seven swing states, supposedly to accommodate voting in the

pandemic, producing an avalanche of unverifiable mail-in ballots and raising concerns about potential ballot harvesting. The poll Mr. Rove cited has never produced a fair assessment of Mr. Trump's support.

Mr. Trump has already been longer at the forefront of consideration for the nation's highest office than anyone in the last century except for Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Nixon, and Reagan. The supposition that he is finished is really the irrepressible wishful thinking of entrenched Trump-haters. It may be accurate, if Mr. Trump is less tactically astute than he has been in the last decade. His critics should remember that Mr. Trump invented and successfully executed a strategy for transforming celebrity and even notoriety into election to the presidency, and that he substantially repositioned the Republican Party directly on top of traditional Democratic political fiefdoms and attracted African- and Latin-American votes by the orthodox application of traditional Republican capitalist values: the tax incentivization of job-creating investment in economically disadvantaged areas. Those who have under-estimated him before should not imagine that he is incapable of adjusting to changed circumstances.

Most Americans have doubtless tired of wildly egocentric and bellicose speeches in which Mr. Trump insults almost all of his competitors. He is now President Trump and all the other credible Republican presidential hopefuls are ex-proteges of his, espousing his goals. All he really has to do is repeat his revised and updated campaign promises in reasonable terms, and speak less about himself and avoid gratuitous insults of his opponents. If he does that, he has a winning ticket: it is very unlikely that the Democrats can indict him now and it is a long-standing unwritten rule that former presidents are not indicted. Any indictment would be spurious and probably politically counter-productive.

On the hustings, there has been no presidential campaigner as

formidable as Mr. Trump since Reagan. Though Mr. Rove and other opponents panned his candidacy announcement address, and it was too long, it was temperate, good-humored, and contained a comprehensive reform agenda, including congressional term-limits, a roll-back of the Green Terror, and the reestablishment of the border. If he sticks to this formula, all indications are that he will be renominated. The Democrats will have a difficult time facing the voters after the many fiascos of the present regime, whether Mr. Biden and Mr. Trump, or either of them, is renominated or not.

A man who set out to become a television star and designed a form of entertainment which he co-produced with a television network, and which then became a ratings phenomenon for 14 years, should not be assumed to be incapable of updating his shtick. All that is left of the Democrats' monstrous demonization of Mr. Trump is a general distaste for him amongst many voters, but he could disarm a large number of those voters by simply speaking as he has these last two months – there have been no outrageous utterances on social media, no calls for poorly formulated constitutional changes – nothing the nervous anti-Trump media have been able to sink its teeth into.

Those who complacently want the retention of Mr. Trump's policies while disposing of him should remember that that course of action is almost never successful. The British Conservatives tried Thatcherism without Thatcher and Britain is now back almost to the strike-ridden floundering from which Margaret Thatcher rescued it 44 years ago. France opted for Gaullism without de Gaulle, and they lost both: there is no longer a Gaullist Party in France and its place has been taken by the National Front which has tempered its more reactionary policies but not changed its leader; it is faux Gaullism without de Gaulle. Trumpism without Mr. Trump might work with Governor DeSantis, but it's not clear that DeSantis can win the primaries against Mr. Trump. And as Senator Graham said,

in endorsing Mr. Trump, many presidents have promised to stop illegal immigration and move the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and stand up to China, and make the NATO allies pay more, but only Mr. Trump did it all, and more.

And the Democrats are very vulnerable. They can't seriously renominate Biden; they can't expect the voters to forgive the debacle of the present term; they won't get out from under the woke yoke, and instead of taking the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* as the opportunity it is to leave abortion to the states and go after moderate opinion on the issue, they are still prattling the nonsense about Mr. Trump and the Republicans trying to stifle (mis-named) reproductive rights; (they mean contra-productive rights), and the federal Republicans are relatively quiet on the issue. Classified documents have been a more spectacular failure at bloodless assassination than Trump-Russia collusion or the telephone call to President Zelensky. Trump-hate is staler than Mr. Trump and is gasping toward expiry.

Mr. DeSantis is 44; his time will come, without having a bruising, uphill battle with the incumbent Republican party leader. Willing Trump away will not make it happen. If Trump wants his old office back sufficiently to present himself more likeably, he will return.

First published in the [New York Sun](#).