

SundayReview | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

# Going Against the Republican Herd

Peter Wehner OCT. 21, 2017

A year after President Trump’s stunning electoral victory, the Republican Party is in a very strange place. It’s politically dominant but increasingly unpopular, particularly among young people and nonwhites of all ages, whose level of unhappiness with Mr. Trump and his administration is toxic.

Republicans have all the power but can’t seem to get much of anything done. There are huge internal fissures that are growing rather than shrinking. Just the other day, the president’s former chief strategist, Steve Bannon, with whom Mr. Trump is still close, made his intentions clear: “Right now it’s a season of war against the G.O.P. establishment.”

When Mr. Bannon looks for targets as he prosecutes his “season of war,” it is people like me he has in mind. And Mr. Bannon is right in this respect: Neither of us wants to be — or can be — a member of a party the other gets to define.

It would be silly to deny that Mr. Bannon has several things working in his favor. To understand this, you have to forget about the narrowly decided presidential election for a minute and turn your mind back to the battle for the Republican nomination, which was not close at all. The first thing those of us who are vocal critics of Mr. Bannon and Mr. Trump need to recognize and fully reckon with is that

Mr. Trump's victory in the Republican primaries was not an aberration so much as a culmination, an apotheosis of sorts. Underlying currents and powerful passions animating the base of the party that had been building for years burst forth when Republicans nominated Mr. Trump.

As the world now knows, these feelings of powerlessness, resentment and grievance are widespread, and as a candidate Mr. Trump tapped into them perfectly. Many Republican voters have, at least for now, jettisoned traditional conservatism in favor of the Trump-Bannon brand of ethnonationalism. They have turned inward instead out outward, they have embraced white identity politics as a matter of course and they have developed a disdain for the hard, intricate work of governing.

But the reasons for the rise of Mr. Trump lie still deeper than that. There is a nihilistic strain coursing through the veins of a significant number of people on the American right. They delight in Mr. Trump's effort to annihilate truth and peddle conspiracy theories, and they draw energy and purpose from the unsettling effect he has on the nation as a whole. For them, Mr. Trump is a "fighter," and politics needs to be weaponized in order to be enjoyed. They see politics as World Wrestling Entertainment, and Mr. Trump as the best wrestler in the ring.

As a result, they are bending their will to his ways, seeing the world as he does. Take just one example that continues to startle: Russia. It wasn't long ago that Republicans were nearly unanimous in their critical outlook on Russia. But today, because of Mr. Trump's repeated praise for President Vladimir Putin, Republican attitudes toward Russia are far more favorable. A Pew Research Center poll found that the share of Republicans expressing confidence in Mr. Putin has doubled in just two years (from 17 to 34 percent).

Republicans, then, are faced with an existential question. Will Mr. Trump and his most ardent supporters succeed in their effort to reconceive the party? Can they be stopped? Certainly, if they don't encounter more spirited resistance than they have so far, they may well pull it off.

Let me explain what I mean. Some so-called establishment Republicans, alarmed by the rise of the ethnonationalist wing of the party, comfort themselves with the belief that this movement can be domesticated, absorbed into the

traditional coalition with its sharp edges sanded off. According to this narrative, the Republican Party will weather this storm and emerge in a modified but recognizable form. There are bound to be tensions, but civil war can be averted.

Count me skeptical. Many of Mr. Trump's supporters, who get their news from Breitbart and Alex Jones, from conservative talk radio and Fox News, want a revolution, not accommodation. I'm acquainted with some of these individuals and I hear from them all the time. Their rage at the establishment is off the charts. They want to burn the village down. Until now all the energy has been with them, and it is laughable to think that passing tax cuts will satiate them.

That's why, for many of the lifelong Republican conservatives who never boarded the Trump train, it is particularly disappointing that the Republican leaders we know who have deep disagreements with Mr. Trump and Mr. Bannon are for the most part unwilling to make the counter-case in a forceful and comprehensive fashion. Nor are his private critics rushing to go public with their often mordant analyses of Mr. Trump's movement.

They each have their reasons, and some are more understandable than others. Still, I can't help but feel that they are badly underestimating the gravity of the moment. They are willfully ignoring the danger Trumpism and Bannonism pose to many of the principles they claim to hold dear, and they are deluding themselves into believing that a rapprochement is possible with those who are determined to destroy them.

What this points to is the need for an energetic public case for a conservative politics as an alternative to their case for a revolutionary politics; for Republicans who don't share Mr. Bannon's manias to say so and to offer an alternative, in the area of policy but also in temperament and disposition. Thankfully that's beginning to happen. In the last week, former President George W. Bush, in whose White House I served, and Senator John McCain, the 2008 Republican presidential nominee, offered a philosophical alternative to Trumpism.

In the short term, there may well be a cost to challenging the ethnonationalist wing of the Republican Party. But while the leaders of this wing are politically formidable, they are hardly invincible. Their record at backing successful insurgents

is not very impressive, with Roy Moore in Alabama being a rare exception. In fact, according to some reports, Mr. Bannon is now backing candidates supported by the “establishment” he declared war on, probably in part so that he can claim victories to make himself appear more powerful than he is, and in part because his bench is thin. And whatever else we say about him, President Trump is hardly a model for most Republicans running for office.

Beyond that, though, there’s really no choice about challenging the blood-and-soil nationalists. If they were to triumph — if the tribalistic, angry, anti-government wing of the party turns out to be the vanguard rather than an ugly and unfortunate parenthesis — then the Republican Party would collapse intellectually and morally, and a lot of lifelong Republicans would head for the exits.

It may yet happen. A lot, frankly, depends on whether Mr. Trump is viewed as a success or a failure. If it’s the former, his approach to politics will be imitated and become still harder to dislodge. If it’s the latter, it will largely be rejected and create the space for a fundamentally different approach.

For now, though, and at the risk of sounding hopelessly out of step with the times, let me venture a guess. Much of America, including some large number of Republicans waiting to be mobilized, is thirsting for leaders of courage and purpose who, in a fractious and intemperate age, believe — and can help others believe — that one of the high callings of politics is to heal our wounds rather than to inflict new ones, to appeal to our best instincts rather than our worst. Or, as Robert Kennedy said, in a line he attributed to the ancient Greeks, to “tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world.”

For many of us, Mr. Trump, Mr. Bannon and Mr. Moore represent the politics of dissolution and dehumanization, of resentment and enmity, of half-truths and anti-truths. Republicans who do not want their party to be defined by them need to understand they can’t avoid this fight. They have to decide how they want to wage it and how they are going to win it. I’m not sure if it’s a winning one, but I’m certain it’s an ennobling one. And that should be enough.

Any takers?

Peter Wehner, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, served in the previous three Republican administrations and is a contributing opinion writer.

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