



Where did the Republican Trump-haters go?

Anthony Zurcher

February 28, 2018

On Friday morning at the Conservative Political Action Conference on the outskirts of Washington, DC, Donald Trump took the stage and reminded the packed hall just how far he'd come.

"Remember when I first started running?" the president asked. "People said, 'Are you sure he's a conservative?' I think I proved I'm a conservative."

Mr Trump then launched into nearly an hour and a half of his trademark campaign-style oratory, often acknowledging that he was deviating from his "boring" speech text. On script and off, however, it was clear his intended objective was to drive home the point that he has governed as a true conservative.

He boasted of his tax cuts, right-wing judicial nominations, regulatory rollbacks and defence of religious liberty.

Those are the sort of accomplishments attendees of this annual conference of young Republicans, grassroots activists, party functionaries, conservative media pundits, assorted merchants and special interests longed for through eight years of the Obama presidency, and now they're getting. That's got to make them thrilled, right?

Well, sort of.

A joke no more

According to straw poll of conference attendees, 93% approve of the job Mr Trump is doing in the White House. It's a number not too far from the 80% of Republicans across the US who continue to tell pollsters they support the president.

That, as the president acknowledged, was not always the case. In 2016 - at the beginning of his long march to the Republican nomination and the presidency, Mr Trump abruptly cancelled an

appearance at Cpac when faced with the prospect of a walkout from "never-Trump" conservatives.

Even worse, Mr Trump's 2015 Cpac speech was received by a sparse audience with a shrug. Someone in the crowd shouted a joke about Mr Trump's trademark phrase, "you're fired". People laughed. The man no one thought would really run for president paraded through the hallways of the convention with a phalanx of burly private security guards, looking more like a Las Vegas boxing promoter than a serious candidate.

That year's straw poll had Mr Trump as the presidential pick of just 3.5% of attendees, in eighth place, far behind libertarian-leaning Senator Rand Paul's 25.7%.

Another Republican presidential hopeful at that conference, former Texas Governor Rick Perry, would just a handful of months later describe Mr Trump's politics as "a toxic mix of demagoguery and mean-spiritedness and nonsense" and call his candidacy a "cancer on conservatism".

Last week, Mr Perry - now Mr Trump's energy secretary - was back at Cpac, referring to himself as "footsoldier in the army". Donald Trump's army, that is.

'This is scary'

"Donald Trump hijacked the Republican Party," says Myra Adams, a conservative activist, commentator and consultant who has been coming to Cpacs since the late 1990s. "He was not a conservative by nature, but he slowly became a conservative."

She says that there have been things Mr Trump has done as president that have been "true conservative action" - and he mentioned quite a few during his speech. Throw in that he picked loyal conservative Mike Pence as his vice-presidential running mate, she adds, and there's a lot for Republicans to be happy about.

It's just the other stuff that has been concerning. She takes a deep breath and starts in.

"I think what conservatives, Republicans, Americans who care about this country don't like is the way he comports himself," she says. "And you can do amazing things on one hand with legislation and judges, but if you're tweeting and calling people names and getting facts wrong and basically making everything about you, and you have a White House that's in chaos, and you can't keep people, and you can't staff agencies, and you can't nominate ambassadors, and you just can't get it together as an administration, people look at that and say, oh my God, this is scary."

Adams says she finds herself in a quandary. She backed Ohio Governor John Kasich in the Republican presidential primary, but fell in line behind Mr Trump when he became the nominee. Since then, it's been a struggle.

"You take it day by day," she says. "You just kind of get out and watch the news and hope it's not going to be something crazy or some huge crisis."

Top marks

Adams may have her doubts, but on the main stage, in the smaller side sessions and throughout the convention halls of Cpac last week, however, one conclusion was unavoidable - the Republican Party is Donald Trump's party now.

In a panel discussion titled The Trump Report Card: Conservatives Grade the Administration, the participants took turns singing the president's praises.

"On social and cultural issues, we've seen such a change on how conservative values are communicated on a national level," said Lauren Ashburn, host of a Catholic news cable programme.

Trump and congressional Republicans have done "very good, amazing things that have changed the direction of the world," added Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform.

Van Hipp, former chairman of the South Carolina Republican Party, was succinct. "It feels good to be an American again," he said.

Cracks in the foundation

Beneath this seeming veneer of universal approbation, however, there was some unease that goes beyond the concerns Adams has with presidential comportment. Mr Trump - the onetime New York Democrat - may have become a conservative, but the president is changing the Republican Party, as well.

Anti-immigration sentiment, once scarce at a conference that tilted toward libertarianism, is growing.

During one session, David Bier of the Cato Institute was heckled when he asserted that statistics show immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-born Americans. A liberal participant in a panel discussion on the "Trump effect on American politics" was booed when he suggested that Republicans should support citizenship for Mexican migrants whose cultural values might make them reliable conservative voters.

Then there's the race issue. In a Friday evening conference dinner, the communications director for the American Conservative Union, which hosts Cpac, said that Michael Steele, who served as Republican National Committee chair from 2009 to 2011, only got the job because "he's a black guy".

Mr Steele, on his radio show, said he was concerned about what those comments said about the Republican Party.

"I disagree with the direction this president is taking in this country, because I call BS on a lot of it," he said. "Do you mean to tell me as a black conservative I can't be critical of the president?"

And, perhaps as a testament to the power of the #metoo movement, the most dramatic break came on Saturday. Conservative columnist Mona Charen was roundly booed - and received a security escort from the conference - because she condemned "sexual harassers and abusers of women who are in our party, who are sitting in the White House, who brag about their extramarital affairs, who brag about mistreating women."

In a New York Times column on Sunday, Charen lamented what she said Mr Trump has done to the conservative movement.

"What happened to me at Cpac is the perfect illustration of the collective experience of a whole swath of conservatives since Donald Trump became the Republican nominee," she wrote. "We built and organised this party - but now we're made to feel like interlopers."

She compared the Trump presidency, for traditional conservatives, to an episode of the old science fiction television programme The Twilight Zone.

"Politicians, activists and intellectuals have succumbed with numbing regularity, betraying every principle they once claimed to uphold," she wrote.

She also insisted that, although it felt that way at Cpac, she's not alone.

There are still voices in the Never Trump ranks - columnists and commentators like Bill Kristol of The Weekly Standard and John Podhoretz of the New York Post, Republican consultants Rick Wilson and John Weaver, and a handful of active and former politicians, including Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona, Ohio's Mr Kasich and the elders of the Bush family.

"When I ran for office, I said he is a chaos candidate and would be a chaos president," Bush said last May. "Unfortunately, so far chaos organises the presidency right now."

Satisfaction and swag

In a massive hall a floor below the main Cpac stage, the conference's exhibit "hub" is full of booths for various conservative organisations, vendors, think tanks, publishers and groups with something to sell - either ideologically or materially.

In one stall a person wearing prison garb and a Hillary Clinton mask poses for photos. In another, a woman dressed Kim Jong-un waves an inflatable rocket. The National Rifle Association offers special discounts to join - \$600 (£431) for a lifetime membership that comes with an engraved knife.

On the edge of the room, a group of students from Princeton University holding bags full of conference swag stand and chat. Two are wearing camouflage hats from the NRA. One is bedecked in political buttons, including "socialism sucks" sticker in Senator Bernie Sanders' 2016 Democratic campaign colours.

They gave the president generally positive reviews.

"He's had a lot of great conservative successes over the last year or so. I tend to support him," says Will Crawford of Rome, Georgia. "I don't support every single thing he does, but in general I'm happy with his presidency so far."

Allison Berger of Madison, New Jersey, says she's learned to appreciate Mr Trump's draw as a public speaker - and as president.

"He was not my first, or second, or third, or fourth choice during the primaries," she says. "But I've been very happy he's governed very conservatively so far."

At Cpac and across the US, for most Republicans, at least for now, that seems to be enough.