

THE ASPEN TIMES

As self-justifying Ryan bashes Trump, Gardner must wonder when his turn will come

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July 14, 2019

“History isn’t kind to the man who holds Mussolini’s jacket. — Ted Cruz, as quoted in the new book, “American Carnage.”

I’d love to know what Cory Gardner is thinking as he reads the Paul-Ryan-on-Trump excerpts from “American Carnage,” Tim Alberta’s hottest of hot new books on how the GOP civil war produced Donald Trump and how Trump brought the GOP to its knees.

Gardner must imagine that someday he’d have to take his turn in the dock, maybe if he loses his Senate seat next year and is forced to make his return to decent society. Only then would he reveal his contempt for Trump and for his ignorance and for his casual cruelty. And only then would he try to make his peace with how he sold his soul to Trump, saying that he knows his support looks hypocritical and self-serving, but he never meant to help enable Trump’s unprecedented assault on America’s small-d democratic ideals.

He must imagine, too, that when he does try to excuse himself, as he will, that when he says he was working from within to help moderate Trump’s worst impulses, few will believe him and many will mock him.

If Gardner didn’t understand the trap that he has stepped into — and I’m guessing he has understood it for quite a while — he would have to know by now. Ryan, an ambitious politician not unlike Gardner, has pointed the way. I mean, Ryan, who my friend Charles Pierce calls the granny starver, must know it’s a little late for self-justification now.

“We’ve gotten so numbed by it all,” Ryan told Alberta as he explained that he resigned as House speaker because he couldn’t continue to work with Trump. “Not in government, but where we live our lives, we have a responsibility to try and rebuild. Don’t call a woman a ‘horse face.’ Don’t cheat on your wife. Don’t cheat on anything. Be a good person. Set a good example.”

He also said to Alberta: “I told myself I gotta have a relationship with this guy to help him get his mind right. Because, I’m telling you, he didn’t know anything about government. . . . I wanted to scold him all the time.”

And now Ryan sees Trump’s presidency growing ever more dangerous, without the people around Trump like, you know, him who “really helped to stop him from making bad decisions. All the time.”

I'm assuming that Ryan spoke to Alberta because he is worried about history's judgment of him and his party. Let's just say his confession may not have helped. Ryan's words are basically being greeted as a profile in cowardice. Where was he when he was speaker and the words might have meant something? Where was he after calling out Trump for his "textbook" racism? Where has Gardner been, for that matter, after refusing to vote for Trump in 2016?

Speaking of cowardice, I'm guessing Gardner won't even read the book. He wouldn't be able to bring himself to look that closely in the mirror. I'm sure he hasn't read the Mueller Report either — or won't admit if he has. No sentient person can read the Mueller Report and also support Trump's re-election bid unless that person also is able to make himself believe that the upright Robert Mueller is the liar and the debauched Trump is the truth teller.

"American Carnage," which won't hit the bookstores until next week but is already a No. 1 best seller, details how Republicans who once rejected Trump's reality-show vulgarity were completely co-opted by him for a tax cut for rich people and a couple of Supreme Court justices. I'm so eager to read it that I broke one of my most closely held principles, which is to never buy a book through evil Amazon, so I can be sure to get it the day it comes out.

In the meantime, Gardner has little — or is it nothing? — to say about the mistreated children in cages or the photo of the desperate father and his little girl, hoping to seek asylum, lying dead on the banks of the Rio Grande. He won't say what Trump himself sometimes allows — that the cruelty of separating children from parents is the point of his immigration policy, that the cruelty will discourage others from coming. He has little — or is it nothing? — to say about Trump's now-thwarted plan to undercount Latinos in the coming census as a most brutal and cynical way to promote Republican gerrymandering in favor of "non-Hispanic whites."

What Gardner will say, if he's cornered by a reporter, is that we must do something about the Dreamers, without mentioning that the person who put the Dreamers at risk is the person he's supporting for president. And he'll say we must do something about immigration reform without mentioning that the person he's supporting for president routinely demonizes these migrants.

These are not hypotheticals. Gardner was asked Friday and refused, naturally, to say whether he agreed with Trump's promised nationwide roundup of thousands of members of undocumented families — another move with no motive other than pleasing his base by putting the fear of Trump into people living in the American shadows. Denver is expected to be one of the target cities — and virtually every elected Democrat in the state has registered an objection.

Denver Mayor Michael Hancock put it this way: "Every time there's an issue for him, most recently the Mueller investigation, Trump does something to distract from it. Trump is using immigrants as political pawns."

Michael Bennet released a letter he sent to Trump, asking him to cancel the raids, saying they would "stoke fear and anxiety in some of our most vulnerable communities" and encourage "hatred and division."

And Gardner?

"The law is the law," he said, according to Jesse Aaron Paul of The Colorado Sun, when asked by a reporter about the raids. And when asked again, Gardner dodged again, saying "What we need is an ability to find a way to reform the laws to make sure they work for everyone."

And if the raids come — they were postponed once, remember — and if children in Denver are separated from their parents and if ICE, which has a long record, as reported by the Cato Institute, of arresting the wrong people, rounds up American citizens, what will Gardner have to say then?

We may have to wait for an “American Carnage” sequel to find out.