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Boycott the Republican Party

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A few days after the Democratic electoral sweep this past November in Virginia, New Jersey, and elsewhere, *The Washington Post* asked a random Virginia man to explain his vote. The man, a marketing executive named Toren Beasley, replied that his calculus was simply to refuse to calculate. “It could have been Dr. Seuss or the Berenstain Bears on the ballot and I would have voted for them if they were a Democrat,” he said. “I might do more analyses in other years. But in this case, no. No one else gets any consideration because what’s going on with the Republicans—I’m talking about Trump and his cast of characters—is stupid, stupid, stupid. I can’t say *stupid* enough times.”

Count us in, Mr. Beasley. We’re with you, though we tend to go with *dangerous* rather than *stupid*. And no one could be more surprised that we’re saying this than we are.

We have both spent our professional careers strenuously avoiding partisanship in our writing and thinking. We have both done work that is, in different ways, ideologically eclectic, and that has—over a long period of time—cast us as not merely nonpartisans but antipartisans. Temperamentally, we agree with the late Christopher Hitchens: Partisanship makes you stupid. We are the kind of voters who political scientists say barely exist—true independents who scour candidates’ records in order to base our votes on individual merit, not party brand.

This, then, is the article we thought we would never write: a frank statement that a certain form of partisanship is now a moral necessity. The Republican Party, as an institution, has become a danger to the rule of law and the integrity of our democracy. The problem is not just Donald Trump; it’s the larger political apparatus that made a conscious decision to enable him. In a two-party system, nonpartisanship works only if both parties are consistent democratic actors. If one of them is not predictably so, the space for nonpartisans evaporates. We’re thus driven to believe that the best hope of defending the country from Trump’s Republican enablers, and of saving the Republican Party from itself, is to do as Toren Beasley did: vote mindlessly and mechanically against Republicans at every opportunity, until the party either rights itself or implodes (very preferably the former).

Of course, lots of people vote a straight ticket. Some do so because they are partisan. Others do so because of a particular policy position: Many pro-lifers, for example, will not vote for

Democrats, even pro-life Democrats, because they see the Democratic Party as institutionally committed to the slaughter of babies.

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We're proposing something different. We're suggesting that in today's situation, people should vote a straight Democratic ticket even if they are *not* partisan, and *despite* their policy views. They should vote against Republicans in a spirit that is, if you will, prepartisan and prepolitical. Their attitude should be: The rule of law is a threshold value in American politics, and a party that endangers this value disqualifies itself, period. In other words, under certain peculiar and deeply regrettable circumstances, sophisticated, independent-minded voters need to act as if they were dumb-ass partisans.

For us, this represents a counsel of desperation. So allow us to step back and explain what drove us to what we call oppositional partisanship.

To avoid misunderstanding, here are some things we are *not* saying. First, although we worry about extremism in the GOP, that is not a reason to boycott the party. We agree with political analysts who say that the Republicans veered off-center earlier and more sharply than the Democrats—but recently the Democrats have made up for lost time by moving rapidly leftward. In any case, under normal circumstances our response to radicalization within a party would be to support sane people within that party.

Nor is our oppositional partisanship motivated by the belief that Republican policies are wrongheaded. Republicans are a variegated bunch, and we agree with many traditional GOP positions. One of us has spent the past several years arguing that counterterrorism authorities should be granted robust powers, defending detentions at Guantánamo Bay, and supporting the confirmations of any number of conservative judges and justices whose nominations enraged liberals. The other is a Burkean conservative with libertarian tendencies and a long history of activism against left-wing intolerance. And even if we did consistently reject Republican policy positions, that would not be sufficient basis to boycott the entire party—just to oppose the bad ideas advanced by it.

One more nonreason for our stance: that we are horrified by the president. To be sure, we *are* horrified by much that Trump has said and done. But many members of his party are likewise horrified. Republicans such as Senators John McCain and Bob Corker and Jeff Flake and Ben Sasse, as well as former Governors Mitt Romney and Jeb Bush, have spoken out and conducted themselves with integrity. Abandoning an entire party means abandoning many brave and honorable people. We would not do that based simply on rot at the top.

So why have we come to regard the GOP as an institutional danger? In a nutshell, it has proved unable or unwilling (mostly unwilling) to block assaults by Trump and his base on the rule of law. Those assaults, were they to be normalized, would pose existential, not incidental, threats to American democracy.

Future generations of scholars will scrutinize the many weird ways that Trump has twisted the GOP. For present purposes, however, let's focus on the party's failure to restrain the president from two unforgivable sins. The first is his attempt to erode the independence of the justice system. This includes Trump's sinister interactions with his law-enforcement apparatus: his demands for criminal investigations of his political opponents, his pressuring of law-enforcement leaders on investigative matters, his frank efforts to interfere with investigations that implicate his personal interests, and his threats against the individuals who run the Justice Department. It also includes his attacks on federal judges, his pardon of a sheriff convicted of defying a court's order to enforce constitutional rights, his belief that he gets to decide on Twitter who is guilty of what crimes, and his view that the justice system exists to effectuate his will. Some Republicans have clucked disapprovingly at various of Trump's acts. But in each case, many other Republicans have cheered, and the party, as a party, has quickly moved on. A party that behaves this way is not functioning as a democratic actor.

The second unforgivable sin is Trump's encouragement of a foreign adversary's interference in U.S. electoral processes. Leave aside the question of whether Trump's cooperation with the Russians violated the law. He at least tacitly collaborated with a foreign-intelligence operation against his country—sometimes in full public view. This started during the campaign, when he called upon the Russians to steal and release his opponent's emails, and has continued during his presidency, as he equivocates on whether foreign intervention occurred and smears intelligence professionals who stand by the facts. Meanwhile, the Republican Party has confirmed his nominees, doggedly pursued its agenda on tax reform and health care, and attacked—of course—Hillary Clinton.

We don't mean to deny credit where it is due: Some congressional Republicans pushed back. Last year, pressure from individual Republicans seemed to discourage Trump from firing Attorney General Jeff Sessions and probably prevented action against Special Counsel Robert Mueller. Moreover, Republicans as a group have constrained Trump on occasion. Congress imposed tough sanctions on Russia over the president's objections. The Senate Intelligence Committee conducted a serious Russia investigation under the leadership of Richard Burr. But the broader response to Trump's behavior has been tolerant and, often, enabling.

The reason is that Trump and his forces have taken command of the party. Anti-Trump Republicans can muster only rearguard actions, which we doubt can hold the line against a multiyear, multifront assault from Trump and his allies.

It is tempting to assume that this assault will fail. After all, Trump is unpopular, the Republican Party's prospects in this year's midterm elections are dim, and the president is under aggressive investigation. What's more, democratic institutions held up pretty well in the first year of the Trump administration. Won't they get us through the rest?

Perhaps. But we should not count on the past year to provide the template for the next three. Under the pressure of persistent attacks, many of them seemingly minor, democratic institutions can erode gradually until they suddenly fail. That the structures hold up for a while does not mean they will hold up indefinitely—and if they do, they may not hold up well.

Even now, erosion is visible. Republican partisans and policy makers routinely accept insults to constitutional norms that, under Barack Obama, they would have condemned as outrageous. When Trump tweeted about taking “NBC and the Networks” off the air (“Network news has become so partisan, distorted and fake that licenses must be challenged and, if appropriate, revoked”), congressional Republicans were quick to repudiate . . . left-wing media bias. In a poll by the Cato Institute, almost two-thirds of Republican respondents agreed with the president that journalists are “an enemy of the American people.” How much damage can Trump do in the next three years? We don’t know, but we see no grounds to be complacent.

The optimistic outcome depends to some degree on precisely the sort of oppositional partisanship we are prescribing. For Trump to be restrained going forward, key congressional enablers will need to lose their seats in the midterm elections to people who will use legislation and oversight to push back against the administration. Without such electoral losses, the picture looks decidedly grimmer.

Finally, we might not be talking about just three more years. Trump could get reelected; incumbent presidents usually do. In any event, he is likely, at a minimum, to be renominated for the presidency.

That’s because Trump has won the heart of the Republican base. He may be unpopular with the public at large, but among Republicans, nothing he and his supporters said or did during his first year in office drove his Gallup approval ratings significantly below 80 percent. Forced to choose between their support for Trump and their suspicion of Russia, conservatives went with Trump. Forced to choose between their support for Trump and their insistence that character matters, evangelicals went with Trump.

It’s Trump’s party now; or, perhaps more to the point, it’s Trumpism’s party, because a portion of the base seems eager to out-Trump Trump. In last year’s special election to fill a vacant U.S. Senate seat in Alabama, Republican primary voters defied the president himself by nominating a candidate who was openly contemptuous of the rule of law—and many stuck with him when he was credibly alleged to have been a child molester. After initially balking, the Republican Party threw its institutional support behind him too. In Virginia, pressure from the base drove a previously sensible Republican gubernatorial candidate into the fever swamps. Faced with the choice between soul-killing accommodation and futile resistance, many Republican politicians who renounce Trumpism are fleeing the party or exiting politics altogether. Of those who remain, many are fighting for their political lives against a nihilistic insurgency.

So we arrive at a syllogism:

- (1) The GOP has become the party of Trumpism.
- (2) Trumpism is a threat to democratic values and the rule of law.
- (3) The Republican Party is a threat to democratic values and the rule of law.

If the syllogism holds, then the most-important tasks in U.S. politics right now are to change the Republicans’ trajectory and to deprive them of power in the meantime. In our two-party system, the surest way to accomplish these things is to support the other party, in every race from

president to dogcatcher. The goal is to make the Republican Party answerable at every level, exacting a political price so stinging as to force the party back into the democratic fold.

The off-year elections in November showed that this is possible. Democrats flooded polling places, desperate to “resist.” Independents added their voice. Even some Republicans abandoned their party. One Virginia Republican, explaining why he had just voted for Democrats in every race, told *The Washington Post*, “I’ve been with the Republicans my whole life, but what the party has been doing is appalling.” Trump’s base stayed loyal but was overwhelmed by other voters. A few more spankings like that will give anti-Trump Republicans a fighting chance to regain influence within their party.

We understand why Republicans, even moderate ones, are reluctant to cross party lines. Party, today, is identity. But in the through-the-looking-glass era of Donald Trump, the best thing Republicans can do for their party is vote against it.

We understand, too, the many imperfections of the Democratic Party. Its left is extreme, its center is confused, and it has its share of bad apples. But the Democratic Party is not a threat to our democratic order. That is why we are rising above our independent predilections and behaving like dumb-ass partisans. It’s why we hope many smart people will do the same.