



Trump's GOP Drives Out Reagan Republicans

The GOP had long been looking for someone to fill the shoes of the former president and conservative icon. Instead, they found Donald Trump.

Susan Milligan

May 14, 2021

Republicans have spent decades searching for another Ronald Reagan, the conservative icon who for many continues to embody – years after his death – the small government, optimistic view of America and the Americans who make it happen.

They've yet to find him.

In the fruitless search, they ended up with Donald Trump. Now they're stuck with him – even after his defeat for reelection last year – and the party is struggling with how to move forward and grow without a unifying ideology to define themselves and their vision for the future.

The internal strife was particularly evident this week, as House Republicans ousted Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming from her role as leader of the Republican conference. Ironically, Cheney, the daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney, arguably is more of a Reagan conservative than some of her colleagues, especially the lawmaker expected to be voted in as Cheney's replacement on Friday.

Cheney has high ratings from conservative groups – a 78% lifetime rating from the American Conservative Union, and 80% from Heritage Action – while Rep. Elise Stefanik of New York has a more middling conservative rating of 44% from the ACU and 48% from Heritage Action.

Cartoons on the Republican Party

Cheney's fatal flaw? She dared to take on Trump, not only voting – with a handful of other Republicans – to impeach him after the Capitol riot Jan. 6 but has continued to push back aggressively on Trump's false claims that the election was stolen from him.

"They don't like her because she's not sucking up to Trump. And she's not the only one," says John Campbell, a sociology professor at Dartmouth College and author of the book "American Discontent: The Rise of Donald Trump and Decline of the Golden Age." "The real Reagan-like Republicans are being driven out of the party."

"It's very dangerous for American politics and democracy," Campbell adds. "You can't do it with (just) one sane party."

As for finding a new Reagan, "it's tough to see right now" in the party, says former Sen. Jeff Flake. "You can't see any Reagan-like figure who traffics in the Big Lie. It's antithetical," he adds, referring to false claims that widespread fraud made Joe Biden president.

"There was no way I could stand on a campaign stage with that man and look at my shoes" while Trump insulted his colleagues, Flake says, explaining why he left public service rather than work with a GOP led by Trump. "Liz is certainly in the same camp. You have to live with yourself, sleep at night and face your kids."

Some are taking that path all on their own. On Thursday, a pack of more than 100 prominent Republicans, including some former officials, released a letter threatening to form a third party if the GOP does not reform itself and release itself from Trump's grip.

"With Cheney's dismissal from House leadership, the battle for the soul of the Republican Party – and our country – is not over. It is just beginning, which is why we are forming a 'resistance of the rational' against the radicals," said a column written by four high-ranking former GOP officials. "We still hope for a healthy, thriving Republican Party, but we are no longer holding our breath."

Trump himself has threatened to punish incumbent Republicans he believes were insufficiently loyal to him, pledging to campaign for a primary opponent challenging Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska. Murkowski, too, is a solid conservative but voted to convict Trump in his second impeachment trial.

Even as he awaits a possible return to power, Trump still appears to be keeping a political naughty-and-nice list. Sen. Kevin Cramer, North Dakota Republican, recalls a conversation he had with the former president about a month ago, when Trump was asking Cramer about his assessment of various 2022 Senate races.

"He was asking about one particular senator," Cramer says, declining to identify his GOP colleague. "And Trump said, 'He hasn't always been that good to me.' I said, 'Mr. President, you want to know the truth?' I said, 'This particular senator you're asking about, he might not have run into the wall for you, but from a philosophical standpoint, he's more like you than I am,'" Cramer says, recalling the conversation.

Cramer says Trump acknowledged that comparison. But the tale reflects the reality of the Trump era, where fealty to the man himself is more important than sharing an ideological view of government and policy.

While Reagan had a similarly devoted following, it was an idea and philosophy about the role of government in society that was behind the Reagan Revolution. With Trump, the party line is actually the Trump line – one that can be devastatingly powerful as long as Trump keeps his hold over the GOP, but meaningless once Trump is out of the political picture.

"Reagan certainly had his charisma, but there were ideas associated with that era," says Emily Ekins, vice president and director of polling at the Cato Institute. "With Trump, it does seem to be more about the individual person."

Reagan charmed voters with promises of "Morning in America," gave a 1980 acceptance speech in which he said it was the American people – not he himself – who would put the nation on a

path of prosperity, notes Marcus Witcher, a history professor at Huntingdon College and author of the book "Getting Right with Reagan: The Struggle for True Conservatism, 1980-2016."

Trump, meanwhile, painted an apocalyptic vision of American society in his 2016 convention speech, saying, "I alone can fix it." The Reagan-era party platforms were about reduced taxes, energy independence, deregulation and a strengthening of communities and families. Republicans didn't even have a party platform in 2020, when Trump ran for reelection.

Reagan's legacy was enduring, even for leaders in the other party, Witcher notes, with Bill Clinton declaring "the era of big government is over," launching welfare reform and offering market-based solutions for health care coverage.

Trump's legacy, meanwhile, will continue as long as he has a hold over the party – and so far there is no one else strong enough to challenge Trump's role without suffering a backlash or losing critical Trump voters. The former president brought many new voters into the mix in 2016, particularly disaffected Americans who hadn't voted in years because they felt no one was speaking for them.

With demographics making the core of the Trump base – white, male and working class – smaller as a chunk of the electorate, it's essential that those voters Trump engaged remain active for Trump or a like candidate to succeed.

"For this cycle and likely the next cycle, he'll have a tremendous amount of influence as a kingmaker, says Matt Braynard, former director of data and strategy for the Trump campaign and currently executive director of Look Ahead America, a group founded by former Trump staffers.

Not only is Trump "our most effective fundraiser," but he's having an influence in other ways, Braynard says. He cited at least one case, in the battle to nominate a Republican to face off against Democratic Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler of Washington state, where the GOP candidates have agreed that those not endorsed by Trump will drop out to clear the field.

Republicans are favored to take back control of the House in 2022 and have a good shot at reclaiming the Senate majority as well. Those predictions by campaign experts have less to do with Trump than with Democratic retirements, redistricting and historical trends. But if the GOP indeed succeeds, Trump – if he stays in character – will claim credit. And that will keep the party more firmly in his grasp.

"I don't know if losing the House and Senate" in 2022 will cause the party to break with Trump, Flake says. "I desperately hope so. That's what I would call a fever break. But it hasn't been a fever. It's been a long illness."