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Column: Putting Trump rage ahead of responsible leadership

By Carl Gustin

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The Massachusetts GOP once had a reputation as a key player in effective government. Divided government worked. Republican governors appointed smart, thoughtful people to lead functions within the executive branch.

A Democrat-dominated Legislature found value working with fiscally conservative, socially moderate Republicans. The Legislature passed laws; the governor implemented them through multiple departments.

Today, the Massachusetts Republican Party has written off governing. It now favors the Trump strategy of inciting anger, promoting fear, resorting to personal attacks, and generating rage among those who feel victimized.

Republicans held the corner office for all but eight of the 31 years between 1991 and 2022. They named talented, experienced leaders to run the Departments of Administration and Finance, Education, Health and Human Services, Energy and Environmental Affairs, Housing and Economic Development, Labor and Workforce Development, Public Safety and Security, and Transportation.

It started with William Weld in 1991. He was elected after a high-profile career fighting public corruption as a U.S. attorney for Massachusetts and then head of the Criminal Division of the Justice Department in Washington, D.C. He promoted fiscal responsibility and improving the business climate. A survey of business leaders three years after he was elected found 83% saying the business climate was good or excellent, up from 33% when he was elected. The libertarian Cato Institute gave Weld grades of A and B for fiscal policies. He was reelected in 1994 with an unprecedented 71% of the vote.

It is ending with Charlie Baker, one of the nation's most popular governors among both Republicans and Democrats. Baker served as Secretary of Health and Human Services under Weld and as Secretary of Administration and Finance under Weld and Cellucci. He then went on to become CEO of Harvard Pilgrim Health Care. He was clearly ready for the job. Early this year, a survey by Morning Consult, found Baker to be the most popular governor in the nation, even after confirming that he would not run for reelection. He had a 74% approval rating and a disapproval rating of only 21%, the lowest of any sitting governor.

Sadly, those days are over. Baker likely would have won the general election, but only if he got past a primary election against a Trump-backed primary opponent. Instead, the Massachusetts GOP decided to write off the successes of Republican governors from Bill Weld to Charlie Baker who brought remarkable experience to their leadership.

In doing so, they put the Big Lie ahead of responsible leadership of the executive branch of state government. A Trump sycophant leads the party. And another won 70% of Republican convention delegates. Neither Jim Lyons, the party chair, nor Geoff Diehl, the convention's choice, have much to point to on their resumes to merit support as party leaders under normal circumstances. What they do have is the blessing of Donald Trump. And that's apparently enough.

There is a Republican primary on Sept. 6. Running against Diehl is Chris Doughty. He's a businessman with a proven track record. He has a Harvard MBA and was recognized by the Massachusetts Economic Council in 2016 for job growth and economic expansion. He's a job creator. But success and leadership may not count for much this time. If he follows the path of successful Republican governors, he won't make this his last and only shot at the corner office.

But this is Trump time in Massachusetts. Lyons gloated when Baker announced he wouldn't run for reelection. He could have congratulated Baker or at least said a few kind words. But that's not the Trump way. Following the Trump script, Lyons offered "... it's clear to me that Charlie Baker was shaken by President Trump's endorsement of another Republican candidate."

Lyons, the party leader, will continue to fire off irresponsible comments in press releases designed to fire up a shrinking base. Lyons couldn't wait even a day after the FBI executed a search warrant at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort before declaring "This is about the DC ruling class getting revenge ... it's been no secret that the power of the federal government is the weapon of the DC establishment."

Three days later, in what Lyons' supporters may believe is a thoughtful, insightful, and reflective statement, Lyons drew a "direct parallel" between the FBI search of Mar-a-Lago and Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey's "unprecedented indictment of (a) Republican congressional candidate." He called both "politically driven hit jobs," citing Democrat concerns about losses in November. It apparently didn't register with Lyons that after the Nov. 8 election, the Massachusetts GOP will have no substantive role in state government.

Divided government has served Massachusetts well for most of the past 30 years. It provides a check on corruption and requires compromises that are fundamental to a democracy. Unfortunately, the Massachusetts GOP of 2022 has achieved its goal of putting Trump rage ahead of responsible leadership.