



Summit of ‘principled conservatives’ offers itself as alternative to Trumpists

By Jessica Hill

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WASHINGTON — One comment in a gathering of anti-Trump conservatives here over the weekend summarized the group’s sentiments about the state of the Republican Party.

“I didn’t leave the Republican Party,” said Rina Shah, a political adviser with Renew Democracy Initiative, a nonprofit organization promoting and defending liberal democracy. “The Republican Party left me.”

Shah and other ‘principled conservatives’ gathered Saturday and Sunday at the National Press Club for the Principles First Summit, where about 500 attendees lamented on what’s wrong with the party they’ve given up on in the years since it became aligned with former President Donald Trump’s more extremist ideology.

That faction of the party also met over the weekend for a much-larger Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Orlando, Fla., which was billed as the world’s largest and most influential gathering of conservatives and was attended by Trump.

Speakers at the Washington summit — the likes of outspoken Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., retired Army Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger and Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Ill. — might not have been welcome at the other convention, as many of them have come under fire from Trump.

They are mockingly called a “RINO,” or Republican In Name Only, by other more extremist members of the party loyal to Trump. The extremists will tell you those Republicans attending summit have positions than are more aligned with the Democratic Party. Cheney, for example, is a prime target, as she’s on the bipartisan committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, riots at the U.S Capitol by Trump loyalists looking to prevent President Joe Biden’s electorate win from being certified.

Many of the attendees of the summit are lifelong Republicans who feel like they have no place in the Grand Old Party, which they have seen overtaken by extremists who have been given a

platform in following Trump's lead. They want to see the party return to the founding principles of limited government, free market and free people.

Others at the gathering were longtime Democrats who felt dissatisfied with the current Democratic sentiments and expressed feeling stuck between "Trumpism" and "wokeism."

"There's people who are hungry for new conversation," said Heath Mayo, founder of Principles First, which started in early 2019 as an alternative to CPAC. "I think there's more of us out here than people think."

Others at the summit wondered if there was room for them in the party, if it could move away from what they perceive to be more radical and "Trumpist" views. Some were hopeful, such as former Rep. Barbara Comstock, R-Va., who thinks a more central Republican could come along and sway the Republican base.

But others were a little more pessimistic.

Former Illinois Rep. Joe Walsh doesn't see anything changing within the Republican Party anytime soon. If Trump is gone tomorrow, he said, nothing would change. A similar Republican will come along, and the vast majority of Republicans think Trump delivered on his promises, Walsh said.

"This is where the voters in the party are," said Walsh, who now hosts the "White Flag with Joe Walsh" podcast. "Trump is not the cancer. ... It's metastasized. The fever is not breaking anytime soon."

Former government official Miles Taylor with the Renew America Movement sees the possibility of a successful third party in the future: a more centrist party that upholds "principled conservatism" ideals and provides an alternative for people who are fed up with both ends of the political spectrum. A January 2022 Gallup poll found that 46% of Americans call themselves independent.

"Half of the consumers hate their choices," Taylor said. "There's a market failure."

While Trump continued to promote the false claims of a stolen election at CPAC, speakers at the summit defended the country's systems and institutions.

Benjamin Wittes from the Brookings Institution said it was important to have confidence in the "system." There is a tendency to feel "bamboozled" if the results of an election do not turn out in someone's favor, he said. There's also calls on both sides of the political spectrum to "lock her up" or "lock him up," Wittes said, rather than following the legal process and standing by court rulings.

"A lot of it worked," said Walter Olson, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, an American libertarian think tank, of the 2020 election. "The courts worked ... the states worked. There was no state where there was any serious movement to overturn the results."

Some states need stronger audit procedures, and all states should allow voters to check the status of their ballots, said Mindy Finn, chief executive officer of Citizen Data, an analytics-based public engagement company.

Speakers emphasized the importance of following the law, including complying with a subpoena. For instance, the United States House Select Committee on the January 6 Attack sent many subpoenas to Republicans across the country seeking information, including to two Republican leaders in Nevada — State GOP Chairman Michael McDonald and Republican National Committeeman James DeGraffenreid. But several have not complied.

“Watching Congress simply unable to gather basic information is contrary to the idea of oversight in government,” Wittes said.

With the world watching coverage of Ukraine’s stand against Russia, it was a popular topic at the Principles First summit, however not so much at CPAC, according to a report from The Hill, which wrote that speakers offered sympathy for Ukraine and used the invasion to attack Biden.

At the D.C. summit, many also spoke about the need to support Ukraine and stand against Russian President Vladimir Putin, a “selfish, brutal dictator,” Georgia Lt. Gov. Geoff Duncan said. But they did not use the invasion to criticize Biden, instead saying now is the time to show support for the U.S. and the president.

“Everyone should support our president, whether they’re Republican or Democrat,” Duncan said.

Congress had an opportunity to send arms to Ukraine months ago and it failed to do so, Shah said. “Today Ukrainians are paying the price,” she said.

The “principles first” speakers were aware that their views do not align with the current Republican Party. If a primary election were to be held today and Donald Trump ran, Walsh said, he would win. Trump easily won a straw poll conducted at CPAC over the weekend, with the majority of those in attendance saying they would vote for him.

And while “principled conservatives” face an uphill battle across the country to change the Republican Party and must make the decision on whether to run for offices as a centrist on the Democratic ballot, the fight is barely seen in Nevada.

The Sun could not find any Republican officeholders or candidates from Nevada who attended the summit, nor any that have publicly expressed opposition to Trump. Most Republican candidates in the state have staunchly expressed support for the former president, such as former Attorney General Adam Laxalt who is running for U.S. Senate with Trump’s endorsement and spent the weekend at CPAC.

Some speakers at the summit pointed to Utah U.S. Sen. Mitt Romney as a “principles-first” leader, a Republican holding up the traditional party values and showing common sense. But in Nevada, he’s viewed as a “RINO.” In her campaign ad, gubernatorial candidate Michele Fiore pulled a gun out of her holster and shot a TV displaying Romney.

And that’s exactly why those at the summit feel no longer the party had deserted them.

"A healthy democracy needs a conservative movement that is optimistic, is confident, believes it can win," said David Frum, a staff writer at The Atlantic. "What is the transfusion of light and truth that you are trying to bring into a rejuvenated Republican Party, a renewed republican party? Because that's where it's going to have to go. Maybe it's something that can call itself conservative without the shame and wince that we do when we hear those words today."