



Republican Party on the verge of meltdown

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ANGLETON, TEXAS — Richard Atkinson thinks Barack Obama is a “traitor.” He thinks Hillary Clinton is “the biggest crook.”

He doesn’t trust ABC, NBC or CBS, so he gets his information from Facebook and Fox News. He has not voted for a Democratic presidential candidate since the 1960s. He voted for Ted Cruz, early, in this year’s Republican primary in Texas.

He is, in short, the kind of guy the Republican Party can take for granted in a general election. Except now it can’t.

If Donald Trump is the party nominee, Atkinson says he will probably not vote at all.

The 77-year-old retired IBM employee was attending a high school reunion Saturday at Smithhart’s Texas Grill in Brazoria County south of Houston, a conservative part of a conservative state. Asked about the boorish billionaire, his face darkened.

“He doesn’t have any business being the leader of a nation,” he said.

Every bruising presidential primary creates a cadre of candidate loyalists who refuse to rally behind the eventual party nominee. What’s happening now is different.

It’s an existential crisis. With Trump sailing toward victory, the Republican Party appears to be heading toward a historic crackup.

“We are on the verge of a tipping point in the Republican Party where it could actually split for the first time,” prominent right-wing radio host Hugh Hewitt said on ABC on Sunday. He added: “We are at the verge of a real meltdown . . . it might happen Tuesday.”

That would be “Super Tuesday,” the most important day on the primary calendar, when 11 states vote in each party’s nominating contest. On the Democratic side, front-runner Clinton has a chance to take a big enough lead to make the race against Bernie Sanders boring. On the Republican side, front-runner Trump is leading everywhere but Texas. But his party is at war.

On one side: Trump's devoted fans, plus non-fans willing to support any Republican over the reviled Clinton. On the other: people unwilling to countenance this oft-odious Republican. And there are a lot of them. Despite Trump's electoral dominance, he has the current support of just a third of Republican voters.

The past week brought growing hints that a significant chunk of the party establishment is prepared to jump on the Trump train. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie endorsed him. So did unremarkable congressmen from New York and California.

But the week also produced a wave of emotional conservative dissent. A *cri de coeur* from the writer Erick Erickson, who called Trump "an authoritarian blending nationalist and tribal impulses," set off a "#NeverTrump" Twitter chain in which other Republicans pledged to join Erickson in not voting for him.

"Everybody has his limits," trade lawyer and Cato Institute scholar Scott Lincicome wrote on Twitter. "Mine is 'unstable ignorant authoritarian nationalist.'"

According to a bombshell New York Times story, even senior Republican legislators are thinking about abandoning their party's nominee. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, the Times reported, has authorized Republican senators to run attack ads against Trump to try to save their own seats.

"We'll drop him like a hot rock," the Times said McConnell has told colleagues.

The doomsday feeling deepened on Sunday morning. In appearances on two television shows, Trump refused to express regret for retweeting a quote from Italian fascist Benito Mussolini — "It's a very good quote," he explained — and refused to condemn the Ku Klux Klan or its former leader David Duke, who has endorsed him.

"It's becoming obvious that supporting or not supporting Donald Trump isn't a political choice. It's a moral choice. The man is evil," Stuart Stevens, the chief strategist to Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign, wrote on Twitter.

Trump might be favoured to win deep-red Texas in a general election regardless of what Republican elites did. Here, as in much of the country, Clinton is widely loathed by white voters. In other interviews at Smithhart's, where the menu includes chicken fried steak and Cajun fried alligator, even Republicans who were uneasy about Trump and voting for someone else in the primary said they would eagerly choose him over the former secretary of state they see as a liar or worse.

"He's very raw," said Kathryn Morgan-Erb, 61, a Marco Rubio supporter. "She just has no integrity."

Trump is promising to expand the Republican base by triggering a groundswell of disillusioned voters who haven't been turning out for conventional candidates. His resounding success in the primary, on record turnout, suggests it is at least possible. But a groundswell against him is more likely. Clinton is unpopular. Trump is less popular than any party nominee in modern history.

Some pundits are skeptical that the #NeverTrump crew will hold to its high-minded pledge when November rolls around. Atkinson, contemplating a Clinton presidency, hedged only slightly.

“We do not need a socialist government in this country,” he said. “And I think the Clintons are the most dishonest people I’ve ever heard of. But I don’t like the idea of voting for Trump.”