



It's Trump's party now: Another GOPer quits, laments Trumpist takeover

Alexander Panetta

October 24, 2017

Washington — A first-term conservative lawmaker announced his abrupt retirement from the U.S. Senate in a dramatic speech Tuesday, in which he bemoaned what he called the reckless, abnormal, undignified and un-American behaviour of the Trump-era Republican party. Jeff Flake of Arizona's statement read as an admission of the undeniable shift in the party's balance of power: he conceded that he would have struggled to win his own party's nomination next year, given the target on his back over his frequent criticisms of a president beloved by the rank-and-file.

He urged his peers to show some courage and speak out. He bemoaned not only the president's behaviour, but also policies he called a betrayal of core Republican beliefs like free trade, immigration and the international institutions America helped build after the Second World War. It followed similar warnings from former GOP stalwarts George W. Bush and John McCain, who in recent days both delivered speeches about the turn to nativism, protectionism and degrading language of the modern-day party.

"When the next generation asks us, 'Why didn't you do something? Why didn't you speak up?' what are we going to say?" said Flake, a Mormon former head of a conservative-libertarian think tank.

"I rise to say, 'Enough!'"

Flake asked colleagues not to be complicit in condoning "reckless, outrageous, undignified" behaviours from "the top of our government": "They are not normal," Flake said. "Mr. President, I will not be complicit or silent."

The resignation carried ironic timing.

The president spent the first part of the day embroiled in a Twitter war against the previous Republican to announce his Senate departure. Since announcing his exit, Bob Corker has been warning that Trump's erratic behaviour could cause a Third World War.

Trump responded on Twitter by calling Corker a "lightweight," and "liddle Bob Corker."

The pro-Trump nationalist wing of the GOP celebrated its latest political scalping. With Corker gone, Flake leaving and some urging John McCain to step aside while he battles cancer, insurgents celebrated their growing control.

The headline on the Breitbart website was, "Winning: Flake Out." In another headline, the site quoted its chairman Steve Bannon, the firebrand nationalist who went from a White House position to working to overthrow the party establishment — "Bannon: 'Our movement will defeat you in primaries or force you to retire'."

The White House danced on Flake's political grave. Asked about the resignation, presidential spokeswoman Sarah Sanders said: "Based on the lack of support he has from the people of Arizona, it's probably a good move."

Bannon has already successfully backed an extreme, anti-gay, twice-fired judge who last month illustrated his support for gun rights by carrying one on stage while wearing a cowboy hat. That candidate, Roy Moore, won the party's nomination for a senate race in Alabama.

A political scientist said these events are setting up next year's midterm elections to become a national referendum on Trumpism. David Lublin of American University said this underscores the new reality of the Republican party and voters will soon get to weigh in, in hundreds of congressional and state races.

"(Flake) readily concedes it's now Trump's party at the base," Lublin said.

"By driving out Flake, who's not an old guy, who could have easily served several more terms, where does the Republican party go? Are Trump's voters enough to win elections or is it just going to result in the election of radical Trump wannabes who may be able to win Alabama, but may turn states like Arizona ... and tip them the other way..."

"In terms of the 2018 election, this is going to set it up much more as a referendum on Trump if they nominate sort of Trumpkins."

The Republicans hold a narrow lead in Senate seats and are unlikely to lose the chamber in next year's election. The electoral calendar favours the party, with two-thirds of seats up for election next year belonging to Democrats.

But Democrats hope they might take back the other chamber.

More traditional conservatives lamented Tuesday's developments. Senate Leader Mitch McConnell said, "We've just witnessed a speech from a very fine man." Scott Lincicome, a pro-free-trader at the libertarian Cato Institute, tweeted, "Maybe this is just a horrible blip, or maybe the GOP really is beyond saving."

Flake finished his resignation speech on a hopeful note.

"It is clear at this moment that a traditional conservative who believes in limited government and free markets, who is devoted to free trade, who is pro-immigration, has a narrower and narrower path to nomination in the Republican party," he said.

"It is also clear to me for the moment that we have given up our core principles in favour of a more viscerally satisfying anger and resentment... Anger and resentment are not a governing philosophy...

"(But) this spell will eventually break. That is my belief. We will return to ourselves once more. And I say the sooner, the better."