



Letter: The GOP welcomed extremists and now has a problem

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As David Boaz of the conservative CATO Institute recently wrote, conservatives have a problem because they have adopted a policy of “no enemies to the right.”

This phrase is an adaptation of a policy that originated in the French revolution: “No enemies to the left.” The leaders saw that some far left revolutionaries were engaging in unnecessary violence and destruction but they did nothing to stop them. They felt they could use these dissonant groups to their advantage but didn’t foresee the trouble they would cause later.

Decades ago the Republican Party did not welcome extremists. William F. Buckley Jr., the founder of National Review, felt his greatest achievement was “keeping the party free of extremists, bigots, kooks, anti-Semites and racists.” But with the coming of Ronald Reagan the Republicans adopted Reagan’s view that government was evil so they saw their job as dismantling government and letting free enterprise reign without oversight.

Since Republicans also promoted individualism and rejected the idea that government should legislate programs to promote the common good (other than tax cuts), their politics turned to delegitimizing opponents and institutions and agitating their followers to fear an apocalypse if Democrats were elected.

People and groups with extremist views were no longer rejected by the party but were welcomed as partners in their struggle to gain and retain power. Newt Gingrich liked Mao Zedong’s definition of politics as “war without blood” so in his two decades in Congress he replaced respectful discussion with dysfunctional obstructionism, name-calling, and conspiracy theories.

In 1987 Republicans welcomed the support of Rush Limbaugh, who entertained millions while normalizing racism, misogyny and hate speech, paving the way for Donald Trump. Republicans rejected mainstream media as “fake news” and in 1996 welcomed Fox News where they could hear their own “alternative facts.”

With millions of angry people feeling victimized by “the left,” the establishment and the “deep state,” they were primed to accept a radical leader who said he would rescue them and “Make America Great Again”.

Some Republican leaders were wary of accepting Trump as their candidate but felt they could use his popularity to institute their right-wing policies while controlling his irrational instincts. But they made the same mistake as the French revolutionaries.

Trump was an expert at using the language of grievance and establishment scorn to establish a huge loyal base and Republicans soon found that their political party was now the “Trump Party”.

All this leaves the Republican Party in a perilous position. “David Boaz advises, “You have enemies to the left, but also enemies to the right. Put those guardrails back up.” Former GOP Sen. John Danforth of Missouri recently said, “Republicans need to go back to being a strong conservative party.” On the other hand, Lindsey Graham says they have to stay with Trump: “Republicans don't have a snowball's chance in hell of regaining Senate majority without Trump.” Difficult choices indeed.