

'The office is always bigger than any one individual' — even if it's Trump

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Some Republicans who are retiring from Congress are having doozies of exit interviews.

Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., set off colleagues when he compared supporters of President Donald Trump to members of a cult.

“It’s not a good place for any party to have a cult-like situation as it relates to a president that happens to be purportedly of the same party,” Corker told reporters on Capitol Hill.

Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., hasn’t been going quietly, either, since he gave a speech last year declaring that “anger and resentment is not a governing philosophy.”

These should be the best of times for Republicans. They control the White House and Congress. Republicans are doing what they said they’d do by attacking government regulations, lowering tax rates and filling the federal judiciary with their judges. Trump, despite legitimate fears that he has elevated the status of Kim Jong Un without getting much in return, could again belie the experts if he actually forges a workable nuclear arms deal with North Korea.

And, most significantly, the economy is humming, undercutting the predictions of those who said it would collapse under Trump.

“If the question is when markets will recover, a first-pass answer is ‘never,’ ” New York Times columnist Paul Krugman wrote the day after Trump won the presidency.

He was wrong, and so were a lot of other commentators about Trump and the economy.

So why is Corker comparing his own party to a cult?

The answer is in Trump himself. The president has built such a powerful, enigmatic, spontaneous, confrontational, throw-away-the-script brand — and 52.8 million Twitter followers — that his fellow Republicans don’t quite know what to do with it. And he’s done it, some Republicans point out, by bringing people into the political process — as voters, supporters and defenders on social media — who may not have been under any past GOP tents.

Asked recently about comments by former House Speaker John Boehner that the GOP is the Trump Party now, and that the old Republican Party is taking a nap, Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., responded:

“I don’t think that is right, though there is clearly a group of new voters that have not been Republican voters in the past,” said Blunt, who generally supports Trump but has expressed concerns about the president’s tariff-leveling trade policies. “That doesn’t mean that the Republican Party or the traditional Republican voters have, in any way, gone away.”

David Boaz, executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute think tank, is more critical. Cato warns that Trump-induced trade wars with Canada, the European Union, China and other countries will be like a hidden tax on American households. Boaz cited a fear of Trump as a primary reason why Republicans aren’t pushing back harder on issues like this.

“What Republicans mostly like about Trump is that he holds up a middle finger to the left every day, so it is partisanship, ‘I hate the left,’ that is creating the intense emotional connection he has with maybe a third of the electorate,” Boaz said.

Some Republicans, he said, “are intimidated by a president who has 50 million Twitter followers, and apparently a tight hold on a large part of the electorate. Not a majority, but enough within the Republican Party.”

Rep. Ann Wagner, R-Ballwin, has had one of the more complicated Republican relationships with Trump. She denounced him and withdrew her support after a tape of Trump bragging about how his celebrity allowed him to sexually assault women appeared a month before the election. Then, days before the 2016 vote, she announced she was voting for Trump and urged others to do so, to stop Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. Critics attacked her for flip-flopping.

Since Trump’s inauguration, Wagner has been an ally and has appeared several times at the White House, primarily when Trump has signed bills she helped push into law on everything from combating online sex trafficking to peeling back post-financial crisis banking regulation.

She rejects Corker’s “cult” claims.

“I don’t agree,” said Wagner, who was state Republican chair and a national party official before running for office. “I am an independent player here. I agree with the president and support his policies in very large measure. ... I support the policies that he is putting forward, but I also will disagree when I disagree.”

Then, she circled back to the recent resignation of Missouri Gov. Eric Greitens, a Republican, to make a point about how she views any president.

“The office is always bigger than any one individual,” Wagner said. “And we in Missouri know that better than anyone, OK?”