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Report

Trump's False Conservatism and the Implosion of the Republican Party in America

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President Donald Trump speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Oxon Hill, Maryland, January 2018 [Reuters]

The American University presidential history professor Allan Lichtman made another revealing prediction in November 2017 that President Donald Trump would be impeached before the end of 2018. Trump's political future remains haunted by a "Russian sword of Damocles [that] is hanging over this American president by the slenderest of threads. When this sword falls even Republicans, as in the Nixon case, will likely be compelled to begin impeachment proceedings." Now, The White House lawyers feel edgy after Trump expressed his consent to answer Special Prosecutor Robert Muller's questions "under oath", as part of the ongoing investigation into a possible Russian collusion with Trump's electoral campaign. Professor Lichtman, known as "Prediction Prof", had made a forecast of Trump's presidential victory in November 2016, based on an analytical model that had helped him accurately predict the winner of every popular vote since 1984. The model consists of 13 keys that are "true/false statements that he says can help predict whether the incumbent party will remain in the White House. For each of these statements, a "true" statement favors the incumbent party, but enough "false" statements portend their defeat in a presidential election." The keys serve as indicators of the political dynamics during the year preceding the election day: 1) Party Mandate, 2) Contest, 3) Incumbency, 4) Third Party, 5) Short-term economy, 6) Long-term economy, 7) Policy change, 8) Social unrest, 9) Scandal, 10) Foreign/military failure, 11) Foreign/military success, 12) Incumbent charisma, and 13) Challenger charisma. In this paper, Dr. Lichtman proposes an assessment of the impact of Trumpism on the Republican Party while Trump assaults the free press and tries to undermine several other institutions of America's democracy. Lichtman also reflects on how the Party of Lincoln can revive its base by adopting a political correction from within to help prevent becoming a minority party after the congressional elections scheduled for November 6, 2018. All 435 seats in the House, 33 out of 100 seat in the Senate, and 39 state and territorial governorships will be up for grabs.

The Dark Tunnel of American Conservatism

Conservatism is imploding under President Donald Trump, but not for the reasons that most critics have posited. Although Trump has trampled on the principles of limited government, fiscal responsibility, states' rights, and free markets. These are all dispensable ideas that conservatives have adjusted and readjusted to protect its true core principles. Conservatives have carved out innumerable exceptions to free markets for business subsidies, tariffs, and friendly regulations. They have backed state's rights, for example, on racial issues, but not on drug use, pornography, abortion, environmental controls, and gay marriage. They have long-ago privileged tax cuts above fiscal responsibility and have sponsored their own version of intrusive conservative big government based on enforcing compulsory moral codes, controlling immigration, and backing powerful military and police forces.

The biggest spender and government builder in U.S. history was conservative president George W. Bush. During Bush's first term alone, when his Republican Party controlled the U.S. House for all four years, and the Senate for two years, discretionary federal spending as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product increased by 21 percent. That compares to a 19 percent decline during President Bill Clinton's first term and just a 4 percent increase during President Barack Obama's first term. Bush also built the largest and most intrusive bureaucracy in U.S. history in the massive Department of Homeland Security.

The Right has held together as a political movement since World War I through its core commitment to conserving white Protestant values and private enterprise, not free enterprise. Trump's policies on taxes, trade, regulation, health care, infrastructure, abortion, climate change, and LGBTQ rights are consistent with these principles and are backed by nearly all Republican voters and office-holders. Every Senate Republican and 95 percent of House Republicans voted for the tax cut bill, Trump's major legislative initiative. Polls showed that most rank and file Republicans back the legislation, which Democrats and Independents strongly oppose.

Looking beyond policy programs, Trump has triggered a conservative implosion for other reasons. He has contradicted the conservative affirmation of personal responsibility and morality and its support for the traditional institutions of American politics. He has emerged as a true reactionary, not a conservative, who would turn back the clock to a xenophobic nationalism that is no longer viable in the modern world.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNhz6a1PKWY>

The Highs and Lows of American Conservatism

For more than a century, conservatives have professed their support for people taking personal responsibility for their actions and living up to high moral standards. They have criticized liberals for excusing personal misconduct and ignoring traditional moral values. A conservative, “explains behavior spiritually, and personalizes responsibility,” writes the respected conservative commentator Mark Riebling, “Thus, in the typical policy debate, a liberal makes excuses for the human agent, and a conservative places blame ... What conservatism above all seeks to conserve, I argue, is the Western moral tradition of personal responsibility.”

As the face of America’s conservative movement, Trump is the antithesis of Riebling’s moral man who takes personal responsibility for what he says and does. He thus makes it implausible and hypocritical for conservatives to claim the moral high ground in public debate. In the infamous Access Hollywood Tape, Trump has openly bragged about sexually assaulting women and attempting to seduce married women. Some 19 women have accused Trump of sexual assault or harassment. He threatened to present proof debunking these charges, but failed to do so. He threatened to sue his accusers, but never followed through. Instead, one of his accusers, Summer Zervos, has filed a suit against him, charging the he used his bully pulpit to broadcast defamatory remarks against her. The Wall Street Journal recently reported that Trump’s personal lawyer Michael Cohen arranged a \$130,000 payment to adult-film star Stormy Davis to buy her silence about an alleged sexual encounter with Trump, shortly after his wife Melania gave birth to their child. Contrary to other Republicans, Trump backed Republican candidate Roy Moore in the special election for a Senate seat in Alabama, despite credible accusations of child molestation against Moore.



Dr. Allan Lichtman at his office at the American University in DC. [Getty Images]

A Quinnipiac University poll from December 2017 found that 70 percent of respondents believe that Congress should investigate the allegations of sexual harassment that have been levelled against President Trump. However, the Republicans in Congress who conducted eight inconclusive investigations of then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's role in the tragedy that led to four American deaths in Benghazi, Libya have shown no interest in launching an investigation of the president.

President Trump has failed to take personal responsibility for telling the truth to the American people. He not only lies repeatedly, but has destroyed the very concept of truth, plunging America into an Orwellian world where truth is whatever serves the momentary purposes of the leader. War is peace. Hate is love. The word science is banned from the language. Fact-checkers at the Washington Post documented 1,950 lies or misleading statements by the president during his first 347 days in office, an average of 5.6 per day.

Trump lies about matters small and large and never retracts, apologies, or shows remorse. He has lied about the size of his inauguration crowd and the magnitude of his victory in the Electoral College. He has falsely accused his predecessor Barack Obama of committing a felony by wiretapping his phones in Trump Tower. He has claimed that 3-5 million illegal voters miraculously emerged to vote for Hillary Clinton in 2016 and just as miraculously disappeared without a trace. He has falsely insisted that his tax cut bill wouldn't help himself and other rich people. In a rare moment of candor, however, Trump confided to his ultra-wealthy friends at his Mar-a-Largo club that "You all just got a lot richer."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4t_W6ga9QWQ

Trump: a Fake Conservative

Conservatives profess reverence for the time-tested institutions that have sustained America's free and stable republic for more than two centuries. The Edmund Burke Institute for American Renewal notes in its mission statement that dating back to their eighteenth century intellectual godfather, Edmund Burke, conservatives have respected "the accumulated wisdom within existing institutions."

Yet Trump has been a one-man wrecking crew for America's most precious institutions. He has attacked without basis the FBI, the Department of Justice, and the American intelligence agencies. He has demeaned federal judges for daring to question his unilateral decrees. When Federal Judge James Robart, a George W. Bush appointee, temporarily halted Trump's now defunct first travel ban, Trump called him a "so-called judge," said he had made a "ridiculous: and "terrible decision" that essentially takes law-enforcement away from our country." As a result of Judge Robart's decision, Trump warned, "many very bad and dangerous people may be pouring into our country."

Trump has relentlessly assaulted the free press. Although not a formal branch of government, the press has long stood as a necessary pillar of American freedom and democracy. Thomas Jefferson said, "The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." "Attacks on the press by Donald Trump as enemies of the people [are] more treacherous than Nixon's," concluded Carl Bernstein. Along with Bob Woodward, Bernstein was one of the two reporters who broke the story of Nixon's Watergate scandal. Republican senator John McCain of Arizona said that the suppression of the free press is "how dictators get started," and "if you want to preserve democracy as we know it, you have to have a free—and many times adversarial—press."

Conservatives have been careful to insist that they are not reactionaries seeking to turn back the clock to some earlier time. Conservative commentator Jennifer Rubin explained that, "A reactionary is one who seeks to return to a previous state of affairs. It is not a conservative outlook, which in the Burkean sense looks to people as they are, prefers modest over the radical solutions and builds on the existing morals and habits of the society."

Donald Trump, however, is a reactionary, who would revert the United States to an era of xenophobic nationalism, a vision shared by the most backward-looking of Americans, the neo-Nazis and the white supremacists. Like Trump, these reactionaries yearn for a return to an America dominated by white men and guided by a narrow conception of traditional culture, an America insulated from the world by tariff walls, restrictive immigration quotas, and isolationist policies. "We are determined to take our country back," announced David Duke from the far-right rally August 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia. "We are going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump. That's what we believed in. That's why we voted for Donald Trump."

At any earlier time, extreme nationalism functioned as a foundation for building strong nation states across the world, but it cannot represent the future of the United States—not today. By the early twentieth century, insular nationalism had culminated in a worldwide depression, two catastrophic world wars, the collapse of multiple democracies, and the rise of dictatorships around the globe. In recognition of these tragedies, much of the world has moved toward the only viable future: one of gender and racial equality, global cooperation, free trade, common democratic values, and a united approach to fighting the catastrophic climate change that threatens human civilization.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Es_XPpY8_Mw

An Eclipse of American Democracy?

The number of worldwide democracies has soared—from just twelve in 1942 to more than one hundred by the end of the twentieth century. Still, democracy remains imperiled in the United States and abroad by the reactionary forces that Trump now has unleashed in America. Freedom House, which rates the status of democracies worldwide, found that the election of President Donald Trump accelerated the decline of democracy in the United States. It reported that the Trump administration's lack of transparency, disregard for ethical standards, and failure to safeguard U.S. elections from foreign manipulation, resulted in the steepest decline in the health of America's democracy in forty years of monitoring. It found that America's decline as a beacon of freedom and democracy contributed to the erosion of democracy worldwide and the emboldening of authoritarian rulers. "Democracy is facing its most serious crisis in decades," warned Freedom House's president Michael J. Abramowitz. "Democracy's basic tenets—including guarantees of free and fair elections, the rights of minorities, freedom of the press, and the rule of law—are under siege around the world."

The conservative implosion precipitated by President Trump has had consequences for Republicans at the polls. Democrats won the governorships of New Jersey and Virginia, and gained at least 15 seats in the 100-member Virginia House of Delegates. The party won a U.S. Senate seat in deep-red Alabama, albeit against a flawed Republican. Democrats won a state senate seat by a ten-point blowout in a Wisconsin district that Trump had carried by 17 points in 2016. Nationwide, democrats have flipped the partisanship of many more state legislative seats than Republicans: 34 versus 4.

The root causes of the conservative implosion run more deeply than the disruptive influence of President Trump. As Walt Kelly's Pogo said, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Far too many Republicans have not only enabled the president, but also embraced his disdain for personal responsibility and morality, his subversion of democratic institutions and his reactionary approach to governing. Unless the Republican Party changes course and follows the model of moderate, morally responsible leaders like former presidential candidates John McCain and Mitt Romney it will consign itself to long-term minority status in an increasingly diverse and educated nation.

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