

WILL TRUMP RIDE OFF INTO THE SUNSET OR PLAY THE TRAGIC HERO?

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After the midterms, the

Republican Party and half of the conservative movement are now furious with Donald Trump. Their writs are many — even though the party establishment shares much of the blame.

Even before the midterms, there was a latent feeling among half of Republicans that Trump, given his age, and the animus he incurs among the rich Left and touchy Independents, might retire to the role of kingmaker, rather than try a third presidential election.

Trump's eruptions, coupled with Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' stunning and singular midterm success, ensured that such prior latent conservative unease is now overt.

Indeed, in near hysterical fashion, Trump became stigmatized and scapegoated as the culprit for nearly every Republican race lost. Yet many of his endorsed candidates won. And some who lost did so quite independently of anything Trump said or did.

Yet, as the disappointment over a red ripple began to subside, many found some long-term good: the winner DeSantis was empowered. The now cocky but still demented Joe Biden is delusional, convinced he could be a winner in 2024, and Donald Trump now must either settle down or settle up.

An unspoken paradox arose among many that Trump's vital MAGA agenda might be better continued and advanced by those others than its creator — even as Trump insisted that there can no more be a MAGA party without him than there could be sunshine without the sun.

One explanation of the Trump dilemma is that like all classical tragic heroes and western gunslingers, Trump solved problems through means unpalatable to those in need of solutions beyond their own refinement. It is the lot of such tragic figures to grate and wear out their welcome with their beneficiaries — but only after their service is increasingly deemed no longer needed.

In this moment of wishing the wounded Shane would ride off into the Tetons and leave the more civilized alone, we should remember Trump's four historical accomplishments that will only grow in light of Biden's subsequent disastrous four years.

One is partisan. Trump utterly destroyed the 30-year Clinton grifting and quid pro quo machine in general, and Hillary Clinton's endless and often toxic political career in particular.

It was characterized by the despicable Uranium One sale, the foreign shake-down contributions to the Clinton Foundation, her destruction of subpoenaed emails and devices, and her blatant violation of State Department rules of personal communications.

Clinton's failing campaign and eventual collapse in 2016 was so shocking that it all but crushed her very psyche — to the point that she had funded a foreign ex-spy to systematically and illegally destroy her political opponent. She ended up denying the very legitimacy of the election she lost. Then she topped that off by urging Joe Biden not to accept the 2020 verdict should he lose the popular vote.

Hillary Clinton is physically, psychologically, and spiritually spent — and never recovered from her ill-fated collisions with Donald Trump.

Two, Donald Trump recalibrated the Republican Party to become more populist and nationalist.

Previously it was shrinking and offered the Left an easy stereotype of a small club of aristocratic white corporate elites. Yet Trumpism did not renounce prior Republicanism, at least not entirely. Rather, Trump sought to save it by recalibrating the party.

He demanded toughness with China, attacked illegal immigration, addressed the crisis of the deindustrialized American interior and adopted a Jacksonian foreign policy. That was all in addition to embracing Republican policies of low-taxes, small-government, deregulation, traditional values, and originalist justices.

Three, Trump's actual four years of governance were characterized, before the advent of the pandemic, by robust growth, low inflation, energy independence, low unemployment, a rebuilding of the US military, eventual curbing of illegal immigration, the Abraham Accords, and forcing NATO to spend far more on defense. Trump saved the Supreme Court and lower federal courts for a generation.

Four, in his furious counterassault against a vicious administrative state, bankrupt media, and crazed elite bicoastal class, Trump survived and ended up exposing and discrediting them all. Harvard's Shorenstein Center, which monitors media coverage, found that after just a few months in office, Trump was the subject of the most biased coverage in modern presidential history.

While the media both thrived on him and yet sought to ruin their greatest source of income, it committed suicide through its hysteria and fixations. Trump's "fake news" attacks were crude. But they resonated precisely because he was correct that the media had become utterly corrupt and a mere extension of the progressive project.

Trump in his current state is an object of derision. But that he is still standing is a miracle in itself, given the abuse he endured that was predicated on lies, myths, and venom.

In the first year of his presidency, partisan House members filed articles of impeachment. Foreign Policy printed an essay 11 days after his inauguration calling for his removal through either impeachment, the 25th Amendment, or a military coup.

It became a progressive parlor game to publicly dream of his assassination by explosion, decapitation, stabbing, incineration, hanging, or shooting. Joe Biden on three occasions bragged of his desire to physically beat him up.

For nearly three years he was smeared and slurred as a Russian collaborator. That was a false charge and it devoured 22 months of his presidency, until the Mueller investigation imploded. Frenzied leftist hysterics followed this implosion. His first impeachment remains a stain on democracy.

Trump, remember, did not cancel aid to Ukraine. He was prescient in warning about the serial corruption of Hunter Biden and his father's family syndicate. He was far tougher on Vladimir Putin (greater sanctions, flooding the world with cheap oil, leaving a flawed missile treaty, hammering Russian mercenaries in Syria, sending offensive weapons to Ukraine that Obama-Biden had forbidden, beefing up military spending, etc.) than his predecessor.

Putin did not invade other countries under Trump's tenure, unlike during prior and subsequent administrations.

In its politicized efforts to get Trump, the FBI blew up its reputation as a competent, professional, and disinterested investigatory bureau. A good argument can be made that three consecutive directors, Mueller, Comey, and McCabe, either under oath misled a House Intelligence Committee inquiry or simply flat-out lied to federal investigators.

Retired four-star generals systematically violated the Uniform Code of Military Justice with impunity as they slandered their commander-in-chief variously as Nazi-like, a Mussolini, or analogous to the architects of Nazi death camps.

A common denominator with all his diverse critics — Hillary Clinton, James Comey, Dr. Bandy X. Lee, the CNN cadre, Andrew McCabe, Robert De Niro, Adam Schiff, Howard Stern, Peter Strzok, and a host of others — was that their anti-Trump obsessions either diminished their careers or empowered Trump, or both.

In response to all this, and often in preemptive fashion, Trump became obsessed with the historic injustice of it all. He yelled to high heaven that the Russian collusion charge was an utter hoax. He hammered the message that the COVID pandemic never originated naturally in a wet market but was birthed in a Wuhan virology lab. He screamed that the Hunter Biden laptop was authentic and a window into the Biden family's systemic and lucrative corruption.

Trump was right on all these counts, but, like mythical Cassandra, the more he rattled off the truth, the less likely he was to be believed given the coarseness of his protestations.

To push through his agenda, and to strike back at the Democrat-media fusion, Trump stooped to battle nonstop with minor and irrelevant enemies — and often his own allies.

He wrongly encouraged Jan. 6 demonstrations at the Capitol at a time of volatile passions — missing the story of the 2020 election that was lost far earlier in the spring through altered voting laws.

We will never quite know why the media became obsessed with Trump to the point that it is now a mere caricature of its former self.

Was it Trump's supposed crudity, both physical and vocal, that so shocked their sensibilities, from his orange hue and comb-over flop to his Queens accent? Was it MAGA estrangement from both Republican and Democratic hierarchies? Was it his deplorable base that had earned an entire vocabulary of hatred from the Obama-Clinton-Biden nexus (clingers, deplorables, dregs, chumps)?

Or was it Trump's own Ethan Edwards-like 360-degree, 24/7 constant obsessive combativeness (as portrayed by John Wayne in *The Searchers*)?

Yet, it was not Trump but his enemies who weaponized the CIA, FBI and Justice Department. Trump, unlike Obama, did not spy on journalists. And unlike Biden, he created no ministry of truth.

His supporters did not call to junk the Electoral College, pack the court, destroy the filibuster, or opportunistically add two new states. They did not radically change the voting laws through means that undermined the authority of state legislatures to end Election Day as we had known it for over three centuries.

They did not turn balloting into mostly a mail-in/early voting phenomena that saw the usual rejection rate of ballots plummet even as the number of non-Election Day ballots soared.

A good argument of “ifs” concerning Trump and the recent Republican midterms can be made:

If he had stayed out of picking candidates; if he had helped all Republican candidates including those who opposed him; if at his rallies he had advanced positive “Commitment to America” solutions rather than litanies of his own past hurts and grievances; and if he now pivoted and raised money for the conservative agenda rather than having trashed rivals who nonetheless have advanced his shared cause.

By 2022 even hard conservatives thought Trump was expendable, his liabilities growing larger than his assets, his future potential deemed less than his past achievements, his don't tread-on-me pushbacks to the Left overshadowed by his cul-de-sac and gratuitous spats with irrelevancies, and his former remarkable perseverance in the face of historic and unjust attacks overshadowed by his current preemptive squabbles.

So, will Trump rest on his considerable laurels and ride out gracefully to Mar-a-Lago? And there, as a kingmaker/elder statesman, will he work to institutionalize his MAGA agendas while raising money for any presidential candidate who embraces it?

Or will a subdued candidate Trump now pivot, grow quieter, and let the people vote in the primaries to decide whether they want him anymore — and whether Ron DeSantis sinks as a 2016 Scott Walker on the national stage (a similarly talented and successful governor), or arises to the mythical status of Ronald Reagan?

Or will an unapologetic Trump instead now escalate his slurs, bray at the moon, play out his current angry Ajax role to the bitter end, and thus himself end up a tragic hero — appreciated for past service but deemed too toxic for present company?

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