

A 'Credibility Problem' If You Didn't Vote for Trump?



As a conservative political writer who was vocal about his decision, during last year's election, not to vote for Donald Trump, one of the remarks I often received back then from irritated Trump supporters was, "We will not forget."

The inference was that if Trump ended up losing to Hillary Clinton (as most believed he would), I and other people on the Right, who had taken the "Never Trump" stance, would be to blame. And we would somehow be made to pay for our offense.

Of course, little consideration was given to my reasoning for not supporting the Republican nominee (for the very first time in my voting history). It didn't matter how disturbed I was by Trump's breathtaking lack of character and knowledge, his intolerable conduct, and his deeply flawed positions. No, Hillary Clinton was the *devil incarnate*, and by refusing to shelve my principles and sense of decency for Trump, a Clinton victory would fall on the shoulders of me and people like me (those nasty Never Trumpers who ultimately went with third-

party or write-in candidates).

My response to those promises of retribution was often, "So?" After all, there's only so much any individual is willing to compromise, and if my decision couldn't be respected (the way I respected the decision of Trump voters to choose the lesser or two evils), that was fine. Life goes on.

Well, as we all found out, Trump didn't need the help of holdouts on the Right in order to win. In fact, there really weren't that many of us in the first place – a relative handful, with the loudest being a hodgepodge of Republican leaders and conservative commentators.

Because Never Trump was a voting stance, and not a vow of eternal opposition, it naturally dissolved after election night. With very few exceptions, those on the Right, who couldn't bring themselves to pull the lever for our duly elected president, quickly accepted the results. Among those individuals, those who offer media-commentary on the world of politics took on a new role: evaluating the Trump presidency...with varying degrees of skepticism.

This is not only what should be expected of free citizens who are part of a system of representative government. It's also the instructions that were put forth repeatedly by Trump supporters in their attempts to sell disenfranchised conservatives on their guy. How many times, after all, did we hear pro-Trump pundits, lawmakers, and regular folks implore us to elect the GOP nominee (on the grounds that he was better than Hillary), using the argument that we would then hold him accountable, so that he would be inclined to govern in our best interests.

But as it turns out, that plan wasn't exactly...sincere. Former Never Trumpers quickly discovered that they were expected by the faithful to repent for their sins, and fall in line behind our president, reflexively defending his missteps and

attacking his attackers. Some went that route, but most of us have remained skeptical, supporting the president when he's right and opposing him when he's wrong. And yes, that has sometimes included a measure of snark when the administration goes well out of its way to earn it.

Our nonconformist attitudes haven't gone over well with those who made that pledge *not to forget* that we didn't vote for Trump. In fact, they proudly use it as justification for dismissing pretty much any of our views that aren't complimentary of our president. If you weren't a Trump voter, your criticism of him just isn't credible, no matter how fair or substantive your argument is.

"Who cares what you think? You were a Never Trumper!"

"You never liked him! You're biased! Why should we listen to you?"

"If you had your way, Hillary would be president!"

It's the kind of rhetoric you'd expect from Internet trolls, but more notably, the high-volume sentiment is coming from prominent media-conservatives. Part of it stems from frustration over the president's continued unpopularity and lack of achievements, but there's more to it than that. Villains are needed to explain to fervently pro-Trump audiences why the president is having such a rough go of things. And in this era of political tribalism, *all* dissidents serve as convenient scapegoats.

Fox News's Sean Hannity has led the charge, regularly lashing out at conservative Trump critics in the world of punditry. The tirades have become part of his marketing-brand as a commentator, and others in the business have followed suit, feeding off of the grievances of their fans. What *Hannity and company* almost never do, however, is argue against the substance and merits of these critics' points. Instead, they carry on and on about the supposedly nefarious motivations of

Never Trumpers and insist that their November vote leaves them without sufficient credibility from which to evaluate the president.

In other words, if you didn't vote for Trump, you can't be fair to his presidency. It's a child's argument, but it sells with the tribe.

A particularly egregious example of this sham played out recently on Mike Gallagher's radio show, when he had conservative commentator, Guy Benson, on as a guest. Gallagher is enthusiastically pro-Trump, and Benson is a former Never Trumper who has been both critical and complimentary of the president, dependent on the issue.

Gallagher challenged Benson on his belief that Donald Trump Jr.'s meeting with a Russian government-lawyer (and varying versions of the details of that meeting) bolstered the importance of the Russia probe, including the investigation into collusion. It was a decent debate at first, with Gallagher allowing Benson to state his case, before pushing back. The gist of Benson's argument was that previous statements from the Trump administration, on the campaign having no involvement with Russian officials, had proven time after time to be untrue. Thus, the administration's assurances lacked credibility, and the truth must be further pursued.

That's when Gallagher abruptly side-barred the discussion to sanctimoniously declare that Benson, himself, had a "credibility problem."

"You are a Never Trumper!" said Gallagher, before running through a list of things Benson had said or written during the election. This included Benson's questioning of Trump's electability and his view that Trump was an unprincipled and unreliable individual.

Gallagher continued. "I just want people like you, who are smart and sophisticated, who appear to have the pretense of

objectivity, to acknowledge – and maybe even via a disclaimer in your current work – you’re a Never Trumper, and you didn’t want the guy to win, and you’re not happy that he won!”

Of course, the notion that someone like Benson – who has always owned up to his decision not to vote for Trump – should include that information as a continual “disclaimer” in his work, is profoundly stupid. But Gallagher wasn’t done.

“You should say, *I don’t want this guy to succeed,*” he insisted.

It was a pathetic accusation – one that those familiar with Benson’s work (which Gallagher claims to be) know is very far from the truth. In fact, Benson has been supportive of Trump on a number of initiatives, and has been an outspoken critic of the patently unfair treatment the president has received from much of the mainstream media. This is how the overwhelming majority of former Never Trumpers have approached the Trump presidency.

But Gallagher persisted, insisting that Benson couldn’t possibly go from believing that *Candidate Trump* was unfit for office, to hoping his presidency was successful.

Benson defended himself well against the buffoonery (which went on for several more minutes, including many more calls for him to present a *Never Trump flag* with his work). Benson also blasted Gallagher’s suggestion that he shouldn’t focus on issues that the Trump faithful doesn’t care about.

The interview wound down with Gallagher making the ridiculous assertion that the Trump presidency would be a “juggernaut” if people like Guy Benson, Bill Kristol, and Jonah Goldberg stood in solidarity behind it.

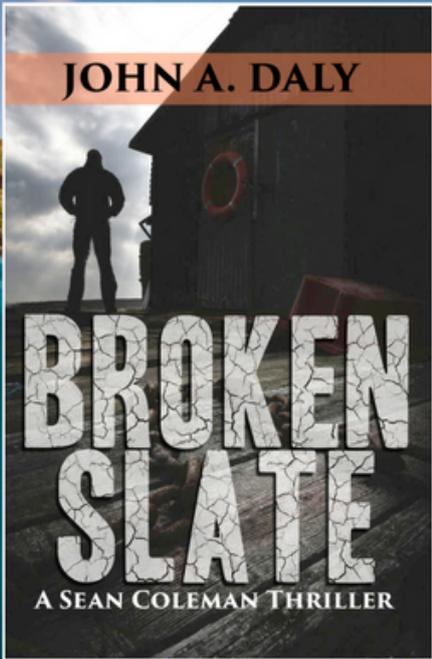
The interview really was one of the most absurd displays of political-tribalism I’ve witnessed from the pro-Trump media (and that’s really saying something). Benson recapped and

further addressed the exchange in a piece he wrote for Townhall. It's a must-read for those who prefer conservative commentary grounded in intellectual integrity and consistency, over disingenuous partisan cheer-leading.

A particularly troubling takeaway from the Gallagher debacle is that it reinforces the notion that free-thinking *individualism* is no longer respected or even identified as a core tenet of conservatism. If a fair-minded, honest conservative like Guy Benson is deemed to lack credibility in his assessment of a Republican president, because he pledges loyalty to principles over politicians, what does that say about the current state of the Right?

Personally, I believe the role of the conservative thinker should go far beyond simply circling the wagons in political unification. It should be about promoting ideas and principles, and holding those who we elect accountable for what they do with the power we grant them.

But then again, what do I know? I'm just a former Never Trumper.



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