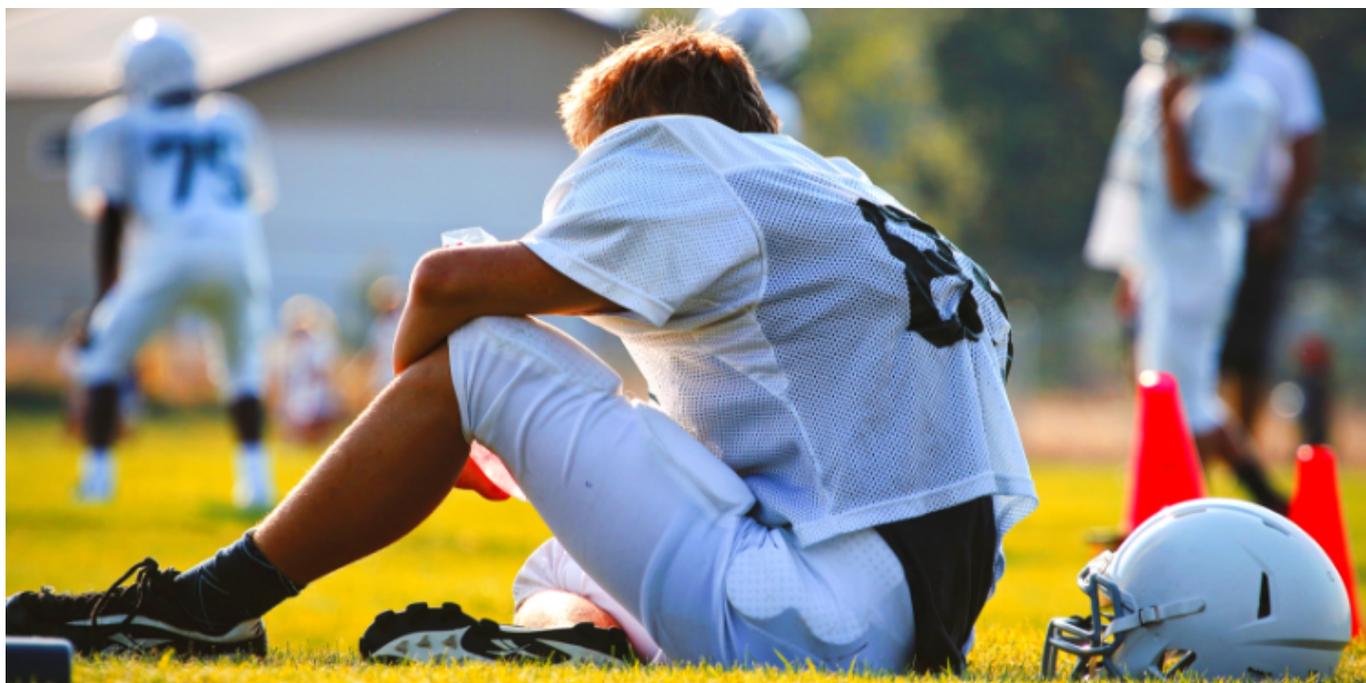


Trump Skeptics Aren't the Ones Sitting on the Sidelines



Back during the 2016 election, when a number of typically reliable Republican voters struggled with whether or not they could support the party's nominee, Donald Trump, there was a common argument among those who had already pledged him their vote. It went something like this:

Yes, Trump is deeply flawed. But he'd be better than Hillary (at least on policy), and America can't afford to have voters sitting on the sidelines for this election. If he wins, don't worry: we'll hold him accountable.

By "sitting on the sidelines," they were of course referring to those who would vote for a non-viable (third-party or write-in) candidate, or possibly not even vote at all.

It was certainly a defensible (and pretty persuasive) argument – the framing of the election as a "binary choice" between two historically unpopular candidates that many (if not most) Americans considered to be utterly unfit for the office. And a large majority of Republican voters clearly subscribed to it.

Those who didn't (for a variety of reasons) became known as NeverTrumpers.

Trump went on to win the election, but it didn't take long to figure out that the very Trump supporters (including prominent media conservatives) who had vowed to hold their guy accountable didn't actually mean it. Once he took office, they effectively dropped several of the very tenets and positions that had shaped conservative opposition to President Obama throughout Obama's entire eight years in office.

For all intents and purposes, the MAGA crowd headed for the sidelines.

It was a sharp deviation from the base's previous take on intra-party politics.

Remember how prominent Republican leaders like John Boehner, Mitch McConnell, and Paul Ryan were vilified (some of them still are) by much of the party base for "allowing" too much debt spending under Obama? Remember the Tea Party movement, its fierce opposition to federal bailouts and government interference in the free market? Remember the group's demands for entitlement reform, and how they ousted congressional Republican incumbents in primaries because they weren't deemed sufficiently conservative on fiscal matters?

Where are those folks now?

They're sitting on the sidelines as President Trump presides over an even higher rate of debt-spending than Obama, with normalized trillion-dollar deficits on the horizon as Trump aggressively proposes even more new expenditures.

They're sitting on the sidelines as billions of taxpayer dollars are used for farm bailouts to gloss over the pain of Trump's ill-advised trade war, which is also sharply driving up the costs (and closing down the plants) of U.S. manufacturers.

They're sitting on the sidelines, enjoying some orange slices, while the president maintains his vow not to allow entitlement reform. Heck, some of Trump's supporters are now even repeating Obama's ridiculous claim (which they'd previously mocked) that increased tax revenue from a strong economy is all that's needed to solve the debt problem.

This crowd tends not to step onto the field for foreign policy issues either.

Remember when Republicans and conservatives assailed Obama for atoning for America's sins abroad, on what became known as his Apology Tour? Remember when they slammed him for pledging more negotiation flexibility with Vladimir Putin to then Russian President Dmitri Medvedev? Remember these same people trashing Obama for mocking Mitt Romney's (later proven correct) statement that Russia was our top geopolitical foe?

Where are those folks now?

They've been sitting on the sidelines as Trump lavishes slobbering praise on Putin, and publicly takes his word on election interference over the conclusions of top U.S. intelligence agencies (when he's not dismissing Putin's murdering of journalists by pointing out that America has done bad things too).

They've been sitting on the sidelines as Trump publicly takes Kim Jong-un's word on knowledge of Otto Warmbier's torture and murder over the conclusions of top U.S. intelligence agencies (when Trump's not carrying on about the brutal dictator's alleged love letters to him).

They've been sitting on the sidelines and excusing these embarrassing, completely unnecessary capitulations (that they would have ridiculed endlessly if it were Obama) as smart and skillful *negotiating tactics* (despite having nothing to show for them).

And then there's presidential rhetoric.

Remember how upset Republicans got whenever Obama stoked societal unrest by weighing in on sensitive local criminal matters, and whenever he issued First Amendment threats against news sources he didn't like? Remember how offended they were by Obama's dishonesty and demagoguery, especially on issues of importance?

Where are those folks now?

They've been sitting on the sidelines, insisting – all of a sudden – that a president's words don't actually matter, and that the leader of the free world carries with him no rhetorical influence or consequence either domestically or abroad.

For what it's worth, I don't think they actually *believe* this in regard to the presidency. I think it's just a convenient cop-out to avoid having to answer for a lot of the rhetorical offensiveness and inanity that one could spend all of their waking hours defending. It's also an easy mechanism for avoiding the expression of dissent. Because, as a number of us have discovered over the past few years, voicing dissent within earshot of the Trump Train is akin to treason.

It really is ironic that President Trump campaigned on *draining the swamp* and a populist message of handing power back to the people, because the fact of the matter is that his most fervent supporters have demonstrated no interest in actually wielding such power. Instead, they've devalued themselves as pom-pom wavers for the captain of their team, as they yell at the other team and accuse the referees of being on the take whenever their calls aren't in Trump's favor.

There seems to be little to no regard for whether or not their guy is actually making good plays – even when those plays stand at direct odds with the policies and principles they've been insisting on for years and even decades.

Now, in fairness, Trump *does* give his base *some* of the things they've wanted, and I'm not just talking about blanket condemnations of Democrats and the liberal media.

He's been excellent on the judiciary (thanks in large part to Mitch McConnell), and he signed into law some mostly good tax reform legislation (which has helped propel a strong U.S. economy and boost job creation). These are great things and they shouldn't be devalued, even if they're standard party-type stuff that any Republican president would have pursued and achieved. Trump absolutely deserves credit for turning these proposals into reality, and even most conservative Trump skeptics (whether or not they voted for him) wholeheartedly agree.

But why are a few political touchdowns and field-goals enough to relegate the base to enthusiastic spectators, especially when several serious problems that drew outrage and dire warnings under Obama have only gotten worse? When did unquestioning loyalty and servility to a political leader become the Republican party's overriding principle?

After all, it wasn't that long ago that the GOP was a party that hailed the rugged individualist.

There's one group, however, that *hasn't* been sitting on the sidelines throughout all of this: that dying breed on the Right that isn't particularly impressed with personality cults, and still believes in the things they believed in under Obama – not just on policy but on matters of character, and holding elected leaders accountable for what they do in office.

This group has continued to speak out on, and pressure the party in defense of, small-government policies and free market practices (while Trump loyalists heckle them from the sidelines with names like "RINO", "swamp creature," and even – wait for it – "liberal"). They have continued to advocate for

American strength and reliability on the world stage, while the Trump crowd calls them “war-mongers” and “neocons.” They have continued to speak out in defense of integrity in American leadership, while Team Trump, from the sidelines, insists that early-morning Twitter tantrums are the breakfast of champions.

And contrary to popular belief, the conservative Trump skeptics who’ve remained on the field have achieved substantive gains from their efforts – gains that have made Trump a more successful president.

As the *Washington Examiner* editorial board pointed out last year, the influence of principled conservatives took hold on Trump when he was still a candidate, and it carried over to his presidency:

“Trump flipped from considering his liberal sister for a federal judicial vacancy to adopting a list of highly qualified conservative jurists from which to draw Supreme Court nominees and appointees to lower courts. He went from supporting abortion rights and the country’s leading abortionist, Planned Parenthood, to being the most aggressive advocate of the unborn. His biggest legislative achievement is a tax cut. These are instances where the party and the movement pulled Trump along.”

Letting “Trump be Trump” (the steadfast position among the president’s loyalists on essentially everything) wouldn’t have compelled a lifelong Democrat and longtime Democratic donor, who entered the race having more in common with Hillary Clinton than he did any of his primary opponents, to adopt clearly inorganic positions on such issues. Yet, it was those stances that earned a lot of reluctant votes from right-leaning Trump skeptics. And for that, Trump owes principled conservatives far more than his base is willing to acknowledge.

Just before Christmas of last year, Trump publicly declared (to the surprise of his foreign policy advisors) that he would begin a rapid withdrawal of all U.S. military forces from Syria. The reactions from the Trump faithful ranged from celebrating to shoulder shrugging, even after Defense Secretary James Mattis resigned in protest over the precipitous move.

Independent voices on the Right spoke up loudly on the inherent dangers of an early withdrawal, and the arguments they presented ultimately changed Trump's mind. This certainly wasn't the first time Trump's bipolar foreign policy was leveled out with a reality check from his side of the aisle. And, like clockwork, the Trump-right (who'd been busy degrading the naysayers) retroactively supported Trump's flip-flop.

Just a couple of weeks ago, Trump vowed to close our Southern Border if Mexico didn't "immediately stop ALL illegal immigration" that was illegally coming through it. The president's fans loved the idea. Conservative dissenters slammed it, pointing out the horrendous economic impact it would assuredly have on trade (among other things). Trump reversed course, and again, his supporters followed him.

The same has been true for sidebar issues ranging from Trump's ridiculously costly military parade to his unpatriotic show of disrespect in Senator John McCain's passing, with American flags at the White House being raised early.

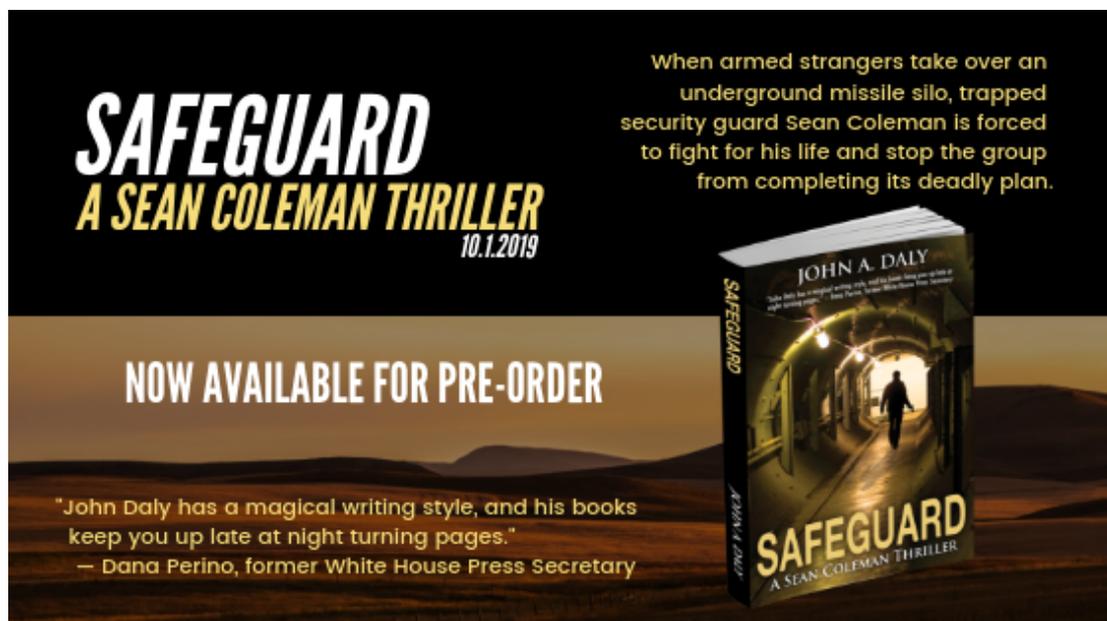
None of this is to say that the GOP isn't the *Party of Trump*. It most certainly is. If it were the party of small government principles, personal responsibility, personal freedom, and moral decency, we'd be seeing a much different agenda coming out of the Oval Office. We'd also be listening to a lot fewer righties fervently defending the indefensible. And make no mistake about it... Trumpism has been wearing down conservatism and individualism through attrition for some time.

But one shouldn't overlook the fact that Trump's biggest wins haven't come from his gut, but rather from traditional conservative sensibilities that many in his base like to mock whenever they're espoused and promoted by those who aren't on *the team*. Imagine if these were the things that Republican candidates still focused on in primaries, instead of which one of them is more pro-Trump. Unfortunately, they're just responding to the new priorities expressed by their base.

One also shouldn't overlook the fact that the President of the United States works for the American people. Presidents weren't meant to be treated like idols or royalty, but rather as public servants who answer to, and should be held accountable by, the American public.

Demoting oneself to the sidelines is a self-debasing surrender of those things.

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