

Trump's Shift to the Path of Least Resistance



It's been nearly a year since Donald Trump won the election, and it seems that most people, at this point, understand why. He took the GOP primary because he channeled the anger of frustrated voters, tore "the establishment" a new one, and rode a wave of overwhelming media coverage against a ridiculously bloated field of mostly traditional politicians. In the general election, though his populist messaging was certainly helpful, his biggest advantage was simply not being Hillary Clinton.

Sure, some still insist that it was his *positions* that earned him the presidency – most notably his vow to build a "big and beautiful" wall across our nation's border with Mexico. But the reality is that throughout both the primary and general elections, Trump changed his positions on issues a number of times (as he has continued to do as president). And when voters were asked in phone and exit polls which issues were most important to them, the border wall was always toward the bottom of the list.

So, even though the Trump base was rattled earlier this week when the president came to an immigration agreement with the Democrats that preserves DACA and doesn't include the border wall, it's hard to imagine that the Trump Train won't stick with him. Because...again, their support isn't based on policy stances. It's based on a persona and an attitude:

Trump is an anti-establishment outsider, and as long as he's sticking his thumb in the eye of the ruling class in Washington, he's doing his job.

Unfortunately, that stance isn't particularly helpful to the American people. If a policy or legislation is tethered to a political vendetta instead of a successful outcome for the nation, problems aren't going to get solved. They'll only worsen.

The conservatives who had warned the GOP and the Republican base about Trump throughout the election have felt particularly vindicated lately, as our president keeps folding like a cheap suit whenever he puts himself in a room with Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi. To these critics, this turn of events hasn't been surprising at all, and it's not because they knew all along that Trump was a reflexive liberal – a longtime Democrat and Democratic donor who didn't change parties until he considered running for president. It's because they understood that Trump has never been interested in *draining the swamp*, but rather feeding his own ego.

There's been very little tangible evidence to suggest that Trump has ever really believed in this populist, anti-establishment philosophy that launched his political career and helped him achieve an unexpected win last November. But it was a useful tool, and it continues to be one.

For example, when Trump caved to the Democrats on the debt-ceiling, the move was framed by many in the president's camp (including notable media-conservatives) as proper payback for

the GOP congress's failure to deliver on a healthcare reform bill. It didn't matter if the debt deal was bad policy, or even that it made Trump's own agenda harder to accomplish. It embarrassed "the establishment" (in this case, the GOP establishment), so it was good. Additionally, as far as Team-Trump was concerned, the move proved that the president really was the *master deal-maker* that he had promoted himself as during the election.

Only, it wasn't *really* a deal, of course. If someone walks up to you and smooth-talks you into handing them your gold watch, that's not a *deal*. That's an instance of you being duped. Schumer got the gold watch, and Trump walked away with nothing he wouldn't have gotten anyway.

It's pretty amazing when you think about it. For years, one of the loudest gripes of the conservative movement and the Republican base was that the GOP gave into Obama and the Democrats too often. It was that anger that cost Eric Cantor his House seat, ousted John Boehner from his speakership, stoked hatred for Paul Ryan (who had previously been widely respected by Republicans), and eventually led to the willingness of voters to turn to Trump.

As president, however, Trump (the master deal-maker), with party majorities in the House and Senate, has already capitulated more to the Democrats than any of the aforementioned individuals. And somehow, it's not his fault, but rather – you guessed it – the fault of the GOP establishments.

Sean "Build the Wall" Hannity even blamed the GOP for Trump not including the wall in his immigration agreement, tweeting, "If reports true 100%. I blame R's. They caused this. They wanted him to fail and now pushed him into arms of political suicide–IF TRUE."

Pushed him into the arms of political suicide? Sounds like the

plot of a *Lifetime* movie.

Let not your heart be troubled, though. Later on, Hannity no longer saw Trump's move as political suicide. He saw it, instead, as pragmatism. The *Fox News* host tweeted: "The failure by Congressional GOP to govern is forcing President Trump to seek alternative ways to get things done."

You see, folks... Trump was just 'getting things done.' No harm, no foul.

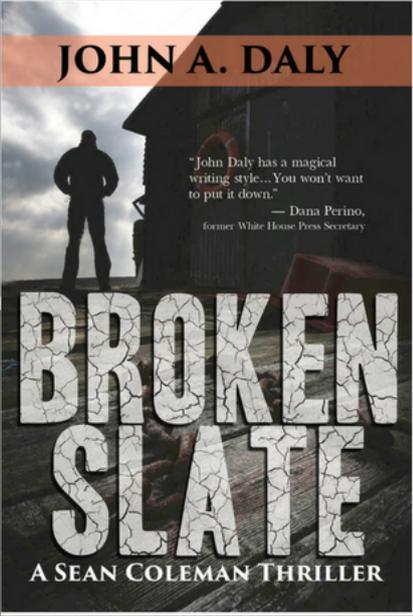
While it's doubtful (though certainly not out of the realm of possibility) that Trump will drop his Republican affiliation down the line, there's a more immediate concern that he will continue handing the Democrats in congress easy victories. Trump's extraordinary ego, after all, is tied directly to a perception that he is a *winner*. Remember, as a candidate, he told the country time after time that if he became president, we were going to get "sick and tired" of all the winning.

But there hasn't been a whole lot of winning.

Nearly every legislative initiative Trump has pursued since taking office has gone down in flames, along with his approval ratings. He's desperate for a win, and he's undoubtedly tired of looking like a fool. So if he can get something – anything – accomplished by following the path of least resistance (surrendering to the Democrats), it seems pretty clear that he'll do it. It's not as if he has any guiding ideology standing in his way, and if he ends up breaking more campaign promises, what does it matter? The liberals won't complain, and Trump's base won't hold him accountable. Future flip-flops will just be blamed on the "establishment GOP," using whatever weird reasoning the pro-Trump pundits and other mouthpieces can come up with.

Winning, baby. That's what it's all about...even if the prize is terrible.

Just imagine all the winning we'll see if the Democrats take back the House in 2018.



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True Believers Make Me Nervous

✘ True believers make me nervous, and not just the lefty true believers with whom I have virtually nothing in common. Conservative true believers make me uneasy too. They're too rigid for my taste. They won't budge from their rock-solid principles, no matter what. They are purists who would rather lose an election than compromise, a word they spit out with contempt.

Call me crazy, but I'd rather win. And while being pure is just great, if say, you're a monk, it's not so wonderful in the real world of politics.

During the 1964 presidential campaign, Barry Goldwater, the

leading conservative politician and true believer of his day, spelled out the philosophy when he said, "I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice! And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!" That may be so, but Goldwater carried just six states, and in terms of the popular vote he lost in the fifth most lopsided presidential election in U.S. history.

At least he didn't compromise on his principles, right?

And now we have Christine O'Donnell, the winner in the Delaware Republican primary for the U.S. Senate. No, she's no Barry Goldwater, in terms of stature. But she did manage to do something Goldwater wasn't able to do: she pulled off a major upset. O'Donnell beat a moderate Republican, Mike Castle, who by every count would have been a shoe-in come November. Now, the odds are long against O'Donnell.

It's no secret that winning a primary, which normally attracts the most ardent voters on both extremes, is not the same thing as winning a general election. Castle is a RINO, a Republican in Name Only – not Rush Limbaugh's kind of Republican, and not mine either. But Delaware isn't Idaho or Alabama. The conventional wisdom says a staunch conservative like O'Donnell, who was supported by the Tea Party, can't win a general election in Delaware.

But the purists says it's way too early to be writing Ms. O'Donnell's obituary. And truth be told, even if she doesn't win, the purists would still rather have her running than a RINO. A win with the likes of Mike Castle is no win at all as they see it. A loss, if it comes to that, with O'Donnell would be a principled defeat.

I get it but I don't buy it. Let's say Castle votes with Republicans only half the time. Isn't that better than having a Democrat from Delaware in the Senate, who will vote with the Republicans none of the time? Isn't it better to have two

(barely) Republicans like Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe in the Senate from Maine – than two Democrats? If Republicans want to truly be a national party, they will need not only conservative candidates who can win in solidly Red States, but moderates (another word the purists spit out with contempt) who can win in states that often vote Blue.

Jim DeMint, the conservative Republican senator from South Carolina – who backed O'Donnell – once said that, **“I would rather have 30 Republicans in the Senate who really believe in principles of limited government, free markets, free people, than to have 60 that don't have a set of beliefs.”** Me too, Jim, but in the real world, the Democrats would shove whatever left-wing programs they want down those 30 conservative throats – and there wouldn't be a damn thing DeMint and his 29 conservative pals could do about it.

I prefer a more realistic conservative's take. I want the most viable conservative to win, Bill Buckley used to say. Viable, as in *electable*.

Conventional wisdom says O'Donnell doesn't stand a chance. But this may be the year conventional wisdom takes it on the chin. This may be the year when there are enough disaffected independents, and even Democrats – enough folks out of work or worried about keeping their jobs and their homes – to elect a supposedly unelectable right-winger. Despite the odds, it could happen. If it does, the true believers will look mighty good. And that would be just fine with me.