

GOP Catch 22: Hard to Win with Trump; Hard to Win Without Trump

I got an email from a friend recently who is as perplexed as I am about Donald Trump's popularity among Republican voters, despite the massive damage he's done to his party.

"Trump lost the House, the Senate, the Presidency, Arizona, Georgia, and the suburbs for the GOP," he wrote. "Not to mention trying to steal an election which resulted in a domestic terrorist attack on the U.S. Capitol. And these [Republicans] still worship the guy and want more."

It's nothing less than astounding, but it's true. Donald Trump, despite all the chaos he's caused, remains his party's most popular – and most divisive – figure.

And it's not only his diehard fans at CPAC yesterday who love and adore him and want him to run again.

A recent Quinnipiac survey found that 87% of Republicans believe Donald Trump should be allowed to hold office again, compared to only 43 percent of Americans overall. And 75% want him to continue to play a "prominent role" in the Republican Party, compared to only 34 percent overall.

Only 11 percent of Republicans believe Donald Trump was responsible for inciting violence on Capitol Hill on Jan. 6, according to the poll, while more than half of all Americans – 54 percent – think he was responsible.

"He may be down, but he is certainly not out of favor with the GOP. Twice impeached, vilified by Democrats in the trial, and virtually silenced by social media ... despite it all, Donald Trump keeps a solid foothold in the Republican Party,"

according to Tim Malloy, who conducted the poll for Quinnipiac University.

And here's some on the ground evidence of that: The seven GOP senators who voted to convict Donald Trump at his impeachment trial have either been censured by their local or state Republican parties or are facing blowback from voters back home.

Whether they realize it or not, those GOP committees are giving Democrats just what they want. Their goal all along has been to divide Republicans over loyalty to Trump. Democrats may viscerally detest everything about him, but they know he is the gift that keeps on giving.

And herein lies the problem for the Republican Party. As long as Donald Trump is around and remains his bellicose self – note what he recently said about Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell – the party will have a tough time winning back those moderate suburban voters in 2024 – voters the GOP has counted on in the past but lost the last time around because they couldn't stomach four more years of Donald Trump.

In fact, Mr. Trump's own pollster has concluded that he lost "largely due to a massive swing" among independents along with the defection of more moderate Republican voters.

While they cheered for him in Orlando, the people who attended CPAC are hardly typical of the American electorate. Most Americans simply do not like the former president, if you'll excuse the understatement. He never reached 50 percent approval during his four years in office. And if they did like him, he probably would have beat Joe Biden.

Winning a straw poll at CPAC was easy for the former president. But it's hard to see how he could win a real election if he decided to run again in 2024. But it's also hard to see how, because of his popularity among the more passionate GOP base, any Republican could win if the candidate

doesn't have Donald Trump's enthusiastic support. And here's where it gets tricky: Mr. Trump's support not only could help a GOP candidate, but also could be a detriment. As the former president's pollster learned: to a lot of swing voters he's toxic.

So yes, it's possible that Republicans could take control of the House in two years, maybe even the Senate. But what the candidates have to say about Donald Trump, whether they embrace him or stay clear of him, whether he endorses them or gives them a "thumbs down," will go a long way in determining whether they win or lose.

"The country is moving past the Trump Presidency, and the GOP will remain in the wilderness until it does too," says an editorial in the Wall Street Journal.

I think that's right. His loyal supporters still love him but since most Americans don't it comes down to one of those sticky catch 22s: Republicans might not be able to win with Donald Trump but it looks like they'll also have a tough time winning without him.

If he gets too close to any future candidate, the moderates who find Trump toxic might sit home on Election Day. And if he doesn't get close enough, the base might find better things to do than vote for a candidate who Trump doesn't find worthy. Heads I win, tails you lose.

Of course, there's always the possibility that Democrats will move so far left that they'll somehow manage to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Republicans can only hope.

Memo from POTUS to MSM: This is War!

Donald Trump wasn't shooting from the hip at the Conservative Political Action Conference the other day when he launched a blistering attack on what he calls dishonest and fake news. This wasn't something the president came up with on the fly. It wasn't part of his usual rambling stream of consciousness that we've come to expect.

No, this was a focused, intensified broadside. It was a declaration of war. Mr. Trump has been bad-mouthing the media for a while now, but this was a ratcheted up, coordinated assault on the news media that Donald Trump claims make up bad news about him.

"And I want you all to know that we are fighting the fake news. It's fake. Phony. Fake," the president told CPAC. "A few days ago I called the fake news the enemy of the people, and they are. They are the enemy of the people."

The crowd loved it.

Here's a good rule of thumb: You will never go wrong bashing the mainstream media to a conservative audience.

And one day before the president spoke at CPAC, the philosophical force behind a lot of his ideas, Steve Bannon, fired off a few rounds of his own. The media is the "opposition party," he told CPAC, and warned that, "It's going to get worse every day for the media."

In the Washington Post, Chris Callizza wrote that, "Bannon doesn't want to change the media. He wants to totally dismantle the media. He wants to break its back and leave it for dead by the side of the road."

The Trump-Bannon war strategy isn't complicated: Eviscerate what is left of the news media's credibility, get the message into the national bloodstream that journalists cannot be trusted, that they make stuff up, and then when they report something about the president he doesn't like – something that may do grave damage to his presidency – they can always say: *"You can't believe them. They're fake news."*

Here's the Cliffs Notes version of the war plan: Donald Trump and Steve Bannon want to bring down the media before the media bring them down. Period!

And while adversarial relationships between the press and the White House are nothing new, and while liberal journalists are tougher on Republican presidents than Democratic presidents, this is different. The animosity level this time around – on both sides – is in the unhealthy zone. A lot of journalists viscerally detest Donald Trump as much as he detests them. More than a few think he's unfit for office and salivate at the prospect that he won't last.

I don't know if Nick Kristoff of the New York Times is one of them, but he did write this in his column: "Trump howls at the news media, not just because it embarrasses him, but because it provides an institutional check on his lies, incompetence and conflicts of interest. But we can take his vitriol: *When the time comes, we will write Trump's obituary, not the other way around.*" (Emphasis added)

I get the impression Mr. Kristoff can't wait for that day. And I'm pretty sure he's not alone.

The president told CPAC that he's not against the media in general; he just wants reporters to be fair. "I'm against the people that make up stories and make up sources," Mr. Trump said. "They shouldn't be allowed to use sources unless they use somebody's name."

That's interesting since Donald Trump is no stranger to

anonymous sources. His campaign staff often spoke off the record when he was running for president; he invoked unnamed sources when he fueled speculation that Barack Obama was born in Africa and wasn't a legitimate president, and oh yeah, just a few hours before Mr. Trump spoke at CPAC, his top aides held a press briefing at the White House, on the condition that they remain ... anonymous.

Is there bias at mainstream news organizations? Absolutely. But fake news isn't biased news, as poisonous as bias can be. Fake news isn't news with a mistake in the story – or even news that quotes an anonymous source that got a fact wrong.

Fake news is fabricated nonsense, like the story that claimed Hillary Clinton was running a child sex ring out of a pizza parlor in Washington.

And fake news isn't real news that makes Donald Trump look bad.

Yes, there have been times when journalists working at reputable news organizations put words in the mouths of people who didn't exist. But, despite what President Trump's loyal fans believe, it's extremely rare.

When I was a correspondent at CBS News, I complained privately about bias and I wrote publicly about how it infected mainstream media coverage of all sorts of issues.

But it's fantasy to believe that journalists arrive in the newsroom in the morning, get their coffee and meet in a dark room where they pull the shades and map out a strategy to make up sources and fabricate news to hurt this or any president. It just doesn't happen that way.

At the risk of sounding like Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, democracy works best when we trust our president – and when we trust news reporters to keep an eye on government.

Right now too many Americans don't have much trust in either.
And how exactly is this good for the country?