

# Donald Trump and the Republican Party: The Making of a Faustian Bargain

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## Abstract

Donald Trump's presidency is likely to become what Stephen Skowronek once labeled as a "disjunctive presidency." Trump's election in 2016 and the issue positions he has taken mark the end of the Reagan Era. Just as Jimmy Carter's one-term signaled the end of the New Deal era begun by Franklin D. Roosevelt, so, too, does Trump's already troubled presidency signify the end of Reagan's conservatism. Changing demographics have hastened the end of the Reagan era, and the next presidential contest is likely to be one that James David Barber called a "politics as conscience," not a conflict election to which Trump was well-suited. Trump's victory, along with the end of the Reagan era, also signals a moment of significant danger for the Republican Party, despite the present unified GOP control of the federal government and recent gains that the party has made at the state and local levels.

**Keywords:** Donald Trump, Republican Party, Ronald Reagan, Stephen Skowronek, Disjunctive Presidency, James David Barber, Conflict election, Politics as conscience, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama

## 1. Introduction

Donald Trump's 2016 victory stunned many Americans—including, by most accounts, the new President himself. On Election Eve, 67 percent believed Hillary Clinton would win; only 29 percent thought Trump would prevail (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2016). As the nation watched in amazement on Election Night, Trump grew uncharacteristically somber as his Electoral College totals edged toward the magic 270 mark. Even his victory speech was subdued, as the President-Elect issued what turned out to be a brief call for unity: "To all Republicans and Democrats and independents across this nation, I say it is time for us to come together as one united people ... I pledge to every citizen of our land that I will be president for all Americans, and this is so important to me. For those who have chosen not to support me in the past, of which there were a few people... I'm reaching out to you for your guidance and your help so that we can work together and unify our great country" (Trump 2016b).

The outcome of the 2016 election was not merely a triumph of will for Donald Trump. It was also a partisan victory, as Republicans won complete control of the White House and both houses of Congress for the first time since 2005. In the House of Representatives Democrats added a mere six seats—far short of the gains the party expected. And in the Senate, Republican losses were confined to a mere two seats in a year when Democrats were expected to win control of the upper chamber. The GOP legislative victories meant the party would strengthen its hold on the U.S. Supreme Court, as the death of Justice Antonin Scalia in February 2016 and the subsequent delay engineered by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, meant that Donald Trump, not Barack Obama, would appoint the next Supreme Court justice. Shortly after assuming the presidency, Trump quickly named conservative Neil Gorsuch to Scalia's vacant seat.

But just below the surface trouble was evident in the Republican ranks. Writing in the Spring 2017 issue of *Modern Age*, conservative scholar Yuval Levin noted: "The election has . . . left conservatives in a position to pursue the policy agenda we have trumpeted for years and yet should leave us unsure about whether it is the right agenda for this time in America, or the one that voters desire. This year should leave us asking hard questions, which is not what winning usually feels like." Levin added that "voters were dissatisfied with the rote, sloganeering conservatism of much of the GOP, which repeats the ends of Ronald Reagan's sentences but has long ago forgotten how they started" (Levin 2017).

Levin's observation that the Reagan era ended with the election of Donald Trump is right on the mark and hardly unexpected. Today we are nearly as far removed from the Reagan presidency as Ronald Reagan was in 1980 from voting for a Democrat, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in 1944. Change is a constant in American politics, and it not surprising that Reagan has passed into the ranks of history since so many voters in 2016—including first-time voters—knew him only as a *historical figure*.

But something more is happening than merely the trading of one Republican president from a different era (Reagan) for another (Trump). In 1993, political scientist Stephen Skowronek described the “disjunctive presidency,” a type of administration that occurs when an old order comes to its natural end and a new one has yet to be born. According to Skowronek disjunctive presidents face an “impossible leadership situation,” adding that such presidents are “affiliated with a set of established commitments that have in the course of events been called into question as failed or irrelevant responses to the problems of the day. The president in this situation constitutes a politics of disjunction. The instinctive political stance of the establishment affiliate—to affirm and continue the work of the past—becomes at these moments a threat to the vitality, if not survival, of the nation, and leadership collapses upon a dismal choice” (Skowronek 1997, 39).

Disjunctive presidencies not only result in the end of a presidency after a single term but are harmful to the president’s party. Skowronek’s cites Jimmy Carter as the last disjunctive president, as the New Deal order came to its natural end and was replaced by a reinvigorated conservatism led by Ronald Reagan (Skowronek 1997, 361-406). Democrats suffered, losing three straight presidential elections and ceding much of the South to the Republicans. Only Bill Clinton was able to transit through the Republican advantage, but even so Democrats lost control of Congress in 1994 after a forty-year reign.

In many ways, Donald Trump’s presidency is likely to be a disjunctive one. While two presidents could hardly be more dissimilar than Jimmy Carter and Donald Trump, what is true of both is that their respective political parties (which controlled Congress at the onset of their presidencies) sought to enact long-cherished goals from an earlier time. Under Carter, congressional Democrats led by Massachusetts senator Ted Kennedy sought to enact a universal healthcare plan that dated back to Harry Truman and balked at Carter’s resistance. Under Trump, congressional Republicans seek to repeal Obamacare, enact massive tax cuts for the wealthy, undo Obama-era regulations, and enhance their dominance of the federal judiciary—all repressed dreams during the Obama years. Like Carter and the Democrats, Republicans are engaged in a Faustian Bargain whereby their embrace of an unpopular president (and the policy goals the party seeks) is costing them valuable support and delaying the day when the party must revamp its principles for a new age.

This article describes how this Faustian Bargain between Trump and the Republican party came to be, and the clear and present danger it poses for the party’s future prospects.

## **2. A Restless Electorate in a Time of Change**

Donald Trump’s 2016 triumph can be attributed, in part, to a historic voter restlessness which Alexis deTocqueville described as a uniquely American characteristic (Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed., J.P. Mayer, 536). This impatience is accentuated after eight years of any presidency—including successful ones. Thus, after eight years of Ronald Reagan, Americans wanted a hands-on executive who would create a “kinder, gentler nation.” And they got George H. W. Bush who would be “ready on Day One” to be that kind of president. After the first Bush, voters wanted someone who would “feel their pain,” and they got the empathic Bill Clinton. Following Clinton and the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Americans sought a moral leader and found that person in George W. Bush who promised: “When I put my hand on the Bible, I will swear to not only uphold the laws of our land, I will swear to uphold the honor and dignity of the office to which I have been elected, so help me God” (Bush 2000). After the second Bush presidency, voters wanted a reflective president who would extricate the country from a devastating financial crisis and two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And they found Barack Obama. Not surprisingly after “no drama Obama’s” professorial-like presidency, Americans found plenty of drama and frank talk in the bombastic personality of Donald Trump who promised to look after the little guy while giving the establishment a good kick in the rear end. As one Trump voter remembered: “I felt like it was—it’s time for a change, not just a suit to change, it’s time for everything to change. Status quo’s not good enough anymore” (Greenberg and Zdunkewicz, 2017).

Trump’s change-oriented message found a receptive audience as former Mississippi governor and Republican National Chairman, Haley Barbour, graphically acknowledged: “Trump is the manifestation of people’s anger. People all around the country want to send Washington the bird, and they see him as the gigantic middle finger” (Caldwell, 2016). Steve Bannon, Trump’s consigliere in the White House, expounded on these resentments, telling the 2017 Conservative Political Action Committee conference that the new administration seeks a “deconstruction of the administrative state” (Bannon, 2017).

The underlying instincts of Trump and Bannon to dramatically shrink the size of government, reduce regulation, and destroy the “administrative state” are, at first glance, aligned with the conservative precepts espoused by Republicans since Ronald Reagan. Running for president in 1980, Reagan decried the “puzzle palaces of the Potomac,” and promised to slay the federal dragon: “Government has grown too large, too bureaucratic, too wasteful, too unresponsive, too uncaring to people and their problems” (White 1990, 52-53, 60). Toward that end, Reagan proposed eliminating the Departments of Energy and Education (both added to the Cabinet by Jimmy Carter). Reagan failed on both counts and government grew, albeit at a somewhat slower rate. Conservative columnist George F. Will noted that Reagan’s promise

to restore Thomas Jefferson's notion of keeping government in local hands remained mostly unkept. Meanwhile, it was Alexander Hamilton's vision of a strong centralized government (replete with its energetic executive) that won the day. In Will's view, Reagan left the Republicans "free to talk like Jeffersonians, celebrating that government which governs least. But they live in, and want to be the dominant party in, Hamilton's America" (Will 1989, A-27).

### 3. The End of the Reagan Era

Despite the shared objective of both the Reagan and Trump administrations to strike a death blow to the "puzzle palaces of the Potomac," the Trump presidency represents something more: the end of the Reagan era. Yuval Levin notes that while Republicans have an "almost unprecedented hold on power ... the conservative movement [has] a weaker hold on the party than it has had since the early 1970s" (Levin 2017). As Trump himself has noted, "This is called the Republican party, it's not called the Conservative Party" (Levin 2017).

From a policy standpoint, there are jarring differences between Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump. For example, Trump has vowed to upend free trade deals, including renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement whose founding father was Ronald Reagan. Throughout his tenure, Reagan engaged in ongoing negotiations with the leaders of both Canada and Mexico with the goal of pursuing his vision of a "common market" with free and open borders (Curtis 1980). George H. W. Bush continued the negotiations, and in 1993 Bill Clinton brought some recalcitrant Democrats along with a united Republican party in support of NAFTA. Donald Trump has taken an opposite view—pulling the United States out of Barack Obama's proposed Trans Pacific Partnership, and wanting bilateral trade deals that involve either ending or renegotiating prior agreements, including NAFTA. This stance was hardly a departure. In 1987, the real estate mogul took out full-page advertisements in *The New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, and *Washington Post* lambasting Reagan's free trade policies, while the United States shouldered the burden for their defense:

Let's help our farmers, our sick, our homeless by taking from some of the greatest profit machines ever created—machines created and nurtured by us. "Tax" those wealthy nations, not America. End our huge deficits, reduce our taxes, and let America's economy grow unencumbered by the cost of defending those who can easily afford to pay for the defense of their freedom. Let's not let our great country be laughed at any more (Ben-Meir 2015).

By 2016, Trump's message found an even more receptive audience: "I have visited the laid-off factory workers, and the communities crushed by our horrible and unfair trade deals. These are the forgotten men and women of our country, and they are forgotten, but they will not be forgotten long. These are people who work hard but no longer have a voice. I am your voice (Trump 2016a). Patrick J. Buchanan, whose America First message was a forerunner of Trump's during his failed presidential campaigns, was struck by the positive GOP reaction to Trump's first address before the Republican-controlled Congress: "Bannon and Trump's message of economic nationalism is the opposite of what Republicans have been preaching for twenty years. But what we saw in the speech to Congress was amazing. [House Speaker Paul D.] Ryan and those guys, standing and cheering for economic nationalism!" (Fisher 2017, A-1). The cheering within the House chamber was prompted by the knowledge that Republican voters are firmly behind Trump. Asked if they agreed with the statement, "The free market has been sorting the economy out and America is losing," Republican voters concurred by a 57 percent to 23 percent margin (Edsall 2017).

Immigration is another point of departure between Reagan and Trump. In 1980, Reagan told fellow Republicans that building a wall on the U.S.-Mexican border was not only a nonstarter, but counter to his vision of an open border with people freely crossing back and forth. In a Houston debate with primary rival George H. W. Bush, Reagan expounded on his vision: "Rather than talking about putting up a fence, why don't we work out some recognition of our mutual problems, make it possible for them to come here legally with a work permit, and then while working and earning here, they pay taxes here, and when they want to go back, they can go back. Open the border both ways by understanding their problems" (Reagan-Bush 1980). Seeking reelection four years later, Reagan told voters: "I believe in the idea of *amnesty* for those who have put down roots and who have lived here, even though sometime back they may have entered illegally [emphasis added]" (Reagan-Mondale 1984). In sum, Reagan saw Hispanics not as an economic and cultural threat but as Americans-in-the-making who accepted his values mantra of family, work, neighborhood, peace, and freedom (See White 1990, *passim*). He believed that as Hispanics entered the U.S. and prospered, they would become future Republicans who would welcome the party's emphasis on strong family values, lower taxes, the importance of hard work, faith in the American Dream, and the freedom to pursue it (See Hanson and White 2016, *passim*).

Announcing his candidacy in 2015, Donald Trump railed against Mexican immigrants, saying: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime.

They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" (Trump 2015a). In his stump speeches, Trump repeatedly promised to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexican border that would be paid for by the Mexican government. Later, the Republican nominee derided a federal judge of Hispanic descent charging he could not be fair in adjudicating a lawsuit involving the now-defunct Trump University. Trump subsequently railed against Muslims (describing, inaccurately, how Muslims in New Jersey cheered the toppling of the World Trade Center) and advocated a ban on their emigration to the United States: "Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on" (Trump 2015b). Shortly after assuming the presidency, Trump signed executive orders creating a Muslim ban by naming several countries whose emigration to the U.S. would not be permitted. After successful challenges in the federal courts, Trump modified his travel ban but the courts have continued to stop its implementation. Trump's orders created chaos at U.S. airports, and the sloppy implementation found voters disapproving: 49 percent called the policy a "bad idea," only 39 percent thought it was a good one (Monmouth University Polling Institute 2017).

Another point of contrast is foreign policy, especially attitudes toward Russia. For much of the twentieth century, Republicans denounced communism as antithetical to American values and a national security threat. Republican presidents, including Reagan, saw themselves as leaders of the free world whose job was to stick up for America. There was a high degree of nationalism in their response, but it wasn't America First. Instead, these presidents placed great emphasis on building strong alliances—especially NATO—and they accused their Democratic opponents of being "soft on communism" when it came to dealing with the Soviet threat (White 1997, *passim*). Trump's America First message shares Reagan's desire for a strong national defense. But Reagan judged the Soviet leadership as reserving unto themselves "the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat" (Reagan 1981) and called the Soviet Union the "evil empire" (Reagan 1983). Meanwhile, Trump has made statements about Vladimir Putin and Russia that would make Reagan turn over in his grave. Most notable was an interview Trump gave prior to this year's Super Bowl in which then-Fox News host Bill O'Reilly described Putin as "a killer." Trump scolded his interlocutor: "There are a lot of killers. Do you think our country is so innocent? Do you think our country is so innocent?" (O'Reilly 2017). Establishment Republicans reeled in astonishment at the President's assertion that the U.S. shared a moral equivalence with Russia and Putin. One need only recall that in 1984 the Soviet Union made a serious attempt to infiltrate the headquarters of the Republican National Committee (as well as the Democratic National Committee), sought to popularize the slogan "Reagan Means War," and demeaned Reagan as a tool of the military-industrial complex (Osnos, et. al, 2017).

#### 4. "It's Trump's Party Now"

Perhaps the most telling sign that the Reagan era is over is that Republican voters are no longer seeking a Reagan-like president. While Reagan's importance to the conservative movement cannot be understated, the powerful image he cast upon Americans—particularly Republicans—lasted long after he left office. In 1988, George H. W. Bush described himself as a plain-spoken man who lacked Reagan's polish: "It's been said that I'm not the most compelling speaker, and there are actually those who claim that I don't always communicate in the clearest, most concise way" (Bush 1988). But Bush's promise of continuity with Reagan was something Republicans (and even some Democrats) wanted. Still, this didn't stop the Republican search for a Reagan-like clone. Seeking the presidency in 1996, Bob Dole told members of the Republican National Committee, "I'm willing to be another Reagan, if that's what you want" (Freedman 1996). Even George W. Bush modeled his administration not on his father's, but Reagan's. According to Lou and Carl M. Cannon's incisive book, *Reagan's Disciple*, "On matters of style and substance alike, the younger Bush and several of his aides and consultants evoked the Reagan model at every opportunity" (Cannon and Cannon 2008, ix).

The effect Ronald Reagan had on his fellow Americans cannot be overstated. At his zenith in 1986, as Reagan presided over the rededication of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, *Time* magazine proclaimed Reagan to be "a Prospero of American memories, a magician who carries a bright, ideal America like a holography in his mind and projects its image in the air" (Morrow 1986, 12). In many ways, Reagan captured the essence of the modern presidency. Years earlier, political scientist Clinton Rossiter believed that the presidency consisted of a series of unimaginable burdens placed on the officeholder. Sending John F. Kennedy a copy of his book, *The American Presidency*, Rossiter noted an epigraph in the text taken from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that read, "Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more.'" Kennedy replied that he believed other Shakespearean lines better captured the essence of the presidency. Citing Shakespeare's *King Henry IV*, Part I, one character boasts, "I can call spirits from the vasty deep," to which the reply is given, "Why, so can I, or so can any man; But will they come when you do call for them?" (Sorensen 1965, 192). Reagan's ability to summon forth the "spirits from the vasty deep" held Americans spellbound.

But the passage of time dimmed the spell Reagan cast. Millions are alive today who never knew Reagan as President—much less as a living human being. A sure sign Reagan has passed into history is the willingness of leading Democrats to quote him at length. Just as Reagan delighted in quoting Franklin D. Roosevelt—to the annoyance of Democrats—today's Democratic party happily quotes Reagan at every opportunity, particularly as he contrasts negatively with

Donald Trump both in terms of policy and persona. In 2016, Reagan biographer Craig Shirley observed that Barack Obama quoted Reagan more frequently than Trump. MSNBC host Joe Scarborough observed that Obama's speech at the 2016 Democratic National Convention was Reaganesque in character: "It could have been a Reagan speech. Trust me. It was about optimism, about believing America's greatest days truly lie ahead" (*Real Clear Politics* 2016).

With the passage of time, Reagan's diminishment will continue. In 2020, there will be more millennial voters (34 percent) than baby-boomers (28 percent) for the first time in American history. Post-millennials, those born after 2001, will constitute an additional 3 percent (Brownstein 2017). The aging Reagan generation, which powered Reagan and two Bushes into the White House, is slowly departing. Just as Reagan's 1980 campaign never summoned the ghosts of 1944, so the 2016 election had few candidates who harkened back to 1980 (an equivalent passage of time). Important presidents who engender realignments—be they Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, William McKinley, Franklin D. Roosevelt, or Ronald Reagan—fade into the dustbin of history as parties adapt to new circumstances and appeal to new voters. This is an entirely natural occurrence, and it is not surprising that the presidency of Donald Trump represents a sharp break with Reagan, both in terms of policy and persona. Simply stated, Ronald Reagan is dead. As Patrick Buchanan recently enthused, "It's Trump's party now!" (Quoted in Fisher 2017).

### **5. Donald Trump's Populism in Juxtaposition to a New American Electorate**

The rise of Donald Trump was facilitated by the Republican party's strident opposition to Barack Obama. Part of that opposition was policy-oriented: Republicans accused Obama of overreaching his constitutional authority by signing executive orders, especially those giving Dreamers immunity from prosecution for entering the country illegally. They also saw Obama as naive in foreign affairs, particularly in his handling of Syria—a dilemma Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described as a "wicked problem" (Clinton 2014, 447). Iran became still another object of derision, as Republicans decried the U.S.-Iranian nuclear agreement as an abject surrender. Topping this list of grievances was Obamacare, which Republicans viewed as giving Obama's supporters something-for-nothing. In 2012, Mitt Romney expressed the widespread resentment Republicans had toward Obama when he decried the so-called "47 percent" of non-taxpayers at a party fund-raiser: "[They] believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to—you-name-it. That's an entitlement. And the government should give it to them. And they will vote for this president no matter what...These are people who pay no income tax. My job is not to worry about those people. I'll never convince them that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives" (ABC News 2012). Ironically, 47 percent was Romney's popular vote percentage.

But Republican opposition to Obama involved more than policy disagreements. Obama's twin victories represented an ascendent America where profound demographic transformations saw the dramatic rise of minorities, single women, and millennials. The numbers are startling. By 2042, whites will be a minority of all Americans, and the U.S. will be a majority-minority nation (See White 2009, *passim*). Already, this emerging demographic fact has manifested itself in Americans under five years old who are majority-minority (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). In 2016, minorities constituted 30 percent of all voters (a record) as whites fell to a record-low 70 percent (Edison Research 2016). This is a sharp contrast to 1980, when whites cast 89 percent of the ballots, while African-Americans were just 11 percent of the total (ABC News 1980). The number of African-American voters has remained fairly steady (holding at 12 percent in 2016 after rising to 13 percent in 2008 and 2012), while the number of Hispanics has exploded from less than 1 percent in 1980 to 11 percent in 2016 (Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International 2008, Edison Research 2012, and Edison Research 2016). Asians are another growing minority, and were 4 percent of all voters in 2016 (Edison Research 2016). In 2015, Asians constituted the largest number of immigrants to enter the United States even outnumbering Hispanics (Taylor 2014, 77).

The breakup of the American family is another demographic revolution in the making. In Ronald Reagan's America, 61 percent of children younger than 18-years-old lived with their married parents. Today, that percentage has fallen to 46 percent (Livingston 2014). Moreover, nearly 32 million Americans live alone, the highest figure in U.S. history (Vespa, et. al., 2013, 4). Finally, another 7.8 million Americans have chosen cohabitation without marriage (Popenoe 2007, 20 and Vespa, et. al 2012, 20). Simply put, American families come in more shapes and sizes than ever before—including single moms and single dads raising kids, those living alone, those who are widowed and divorced, gay families and their partners (either married or unmarried), unmarried partners, and blended families. Pollster Stanley Greenberg finds that when respondents are asked to describe what the term "family" means to them, only one-third answer in some form resembling the traditional nuclear family of "mom, dad, and kids" while a plurality describe the family in one word: "love" (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research 2005).

In 1970, Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg coined the term "the real majority," in which the preponderance of American voters could be described as being "unyoung, unpoor, and unblack" (Scammon and Wattenberg 1970, 45-71).

This largely white, middle-class, middle-aged, suburban, and religiously-minded America elected a quartet of Republican presidents—including Richard M. Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and the two George Bushes. Republicans so dominated the presidency that the party saw the office as their rightful inheritance. Such dominance did not go unnoticed by voters, who saw the Republican party as being more competent. In 1984, *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker wrote that the minority Democrats had become “a party of access” in which “the voiceless find a voice,” while majority Republicans “maintain enough coherence and unity to become a party of government” (Wicker 1984, E-37).

For Republicans, Barack Obama’s ascension to the presidency differed from that of Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton who many viewed as Oval Office interlopers. To many, Obama represented the passing of a once-familiar, Republican-dominated America where the natural order of things was understood, English was spoken, and whites were the dominant race. This embodiment of an orderly, suburban, and mostly white America was captured nicely in a 1967 essay by James Q. Wilson who described the requisite “Sunday Afternoon Drive” in “Reagan Country” as looking at a home to see “how much it cost, how well it was cared for, how good a lawn had been coaxed into uncertain life, and how tastefully plants and shrubs had been set out” (Wilson 1967, 40). An established order of tastefully-decorated suburban homes and established cultural values characteristic of a prosperous and mostly white, middle-class country were everywhere to be seen and admired.

Barack Obama’s America represented the rise of a different country that threatened established norms and cultural values of Americans whose memories harkened back to the 1950s and the 1960s. Focus groups conducted by Democratic pollster Stanley B. Greenberg and his partner, former Bill Clinton strategist James Carville, revealed an angry Republican party whose members resented the demographic and cultural changes being thrust upon them:

Don’t come here and make me speak your language. Don’t fly your flag. You’re on American soil. You’re an American. You come to our country you need to learn our language. Why should I put “press 1” if I want to speak in English? You know, everything—every politically correct machine out there says, “Press 1 for English. Press 2 for Spanish” (White 2016, 8).

—Evangelical man, Roanoke, Virginia.

There’s so much of the electorate in those groups that Democrats are going to take every time because they’ve been on the rolls of the government their entire lives. They don’t know better (White 2016, 8).

—Tea Party Man, Raleigh, North Carolina.

By 2016, this cultural resentment had become widespread within Republican ranks and Donald J. Trump became its champion. Trump argued that the federal government was run by corrupt politicians who allowed illegal immigrants easy entry, signed bad trade deals that undermined manufacturing jobs, refused to stand-up for America overseas, and allowed “radical Muslim extremists” to run free in the Middle East and, eventually, find their way into the United States. These sentiments found favor with the party’s base:

- < 71 percent of Republicans agreed with Trump’s proposed ban on Muslim immigration (Wong 2016);
- < 67 percent wanted more scrutiny of Muslims already in the U.S. (Pfeiffer 2016);
- < 67 percent wanted a wall constructed on the U.S.-Mexican border (Pfeiffer 2016);
- < 69 percent thought immigrants were a “burden” on the U.S. (Pfeiffer 2016);
- < 67 percent thought free trade had been bad for the U.S. (Pfeiffer 2016);
- < 51 percent believed that Trump’s view of what the Republican party stands for best matches their own; only 33 percent chose House Speaker Paul Ryan as the better spokesperson (Selzer and Company 2017).

Adding to the Republicans’ angst was a sense that if the party did *not* elect Trump, the America they once knew would be gone forever. Fox News radio host Sean Hannity captured their prevailing sentiments as the Trump-Clinton campaign rounded the final curve in early October: “America lives or dies in thirty-nine days” (Levin 2017). As many have noted, Trump’s base voters and those not preternaturally inclined to him—including conservative intellectuals and evangelicals—rallied to the Republican ticket in the belief that, as Levin wrote, “the case for Trump [was] a Hail Mary pass that might well be the American republic’s last chance” (Levin 2017). It was precisely these sentiments that transformed the GOP into the party of Trump.

But truth be told, Trump was always the GOP’s sole proprietor. The New York businessman prevailed in a 17-candidate primary field because he best represented the attitudes of Republican voters. Many believed that the America they once

knew was forever lost with the election of the first African-American president. And Trump tapped into these sentiments with his dogged pursuit of the claim that Barack Obama was born in Kenya, forcing a visibly annoyed Obama to release a long form of his Hawaiian birth certificate. Trump also knew that many Republicans falsely believed Obama was a Muslim, and he sought to capitalize on that by banning Muslim immigration to the U.S. Simply put, Trump's supporters saw Obama as the subversive "other" whose presidency was fraudulent and whose purpose was to undermine the United States. Trump communicated that both explicitly and implicitly to his fervent supporters who admired his brashness and politically incorrect speech. Widespread sentiments such as, "He says what he thinks," implicitly contained the corollary, "And that's what I believe, too."

Also fueling Republican anger was not simply hatred of Barack Obama, but a widespread feeling that he had been *successful*. To this point, Obama signed into law the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act—a measure Republicans pejoratively referred to as "Obamacare" (a term Obama embraced). In the view of many Republicans, Obama was rewarding his loyal supporters (most of them minorities) by giving them something-for-nothing—be it a stimulus bill, Obamacare, auto bailout, banking reform, or sanctuary from prosecution for being in the country illegally. As one Tea Party sympathizer put it: "When Congress is gone. . . he just does an Executive Order. He's going to get anything he wants. And there's nobody there that will have the guts enough to stand up to him" (White 2016, 100).

Donald J. Trump played up to these sentiments by promising to be a president of *action*: undo Obamacare; appoint conservative justices to the U.S. Supreme Court; give jobs to workers undercut by trade deals Obama supported; end the something-for-nothing programs designed to benefit Obama's minority supporters; build a wall on the Mexican border and deport 11 million illegal immigrants; bring "law-and-order" to minority neighborhoods; ban Muslims from entering the U.S.; "bomb the shit" out of ISIS; take the oil from Iraq; enact term limits; negate Obama's executive orders; reform the tax code; teach Republican officeholders how to win; and "make America great again." In short, a President Trump would expunge Obama from the history books and reduce the 44<sup>th</sup> President to a mere asterisk. That erasure—more than anything else—is exactly what Republican partisans wanted, and 90 percent cast their ballots for Trump (Edison Research 2016). GOP dissenters completely ignored Trump's dominance of the party base. At its core the #NeverTrump movement represented an infinitesimally small intellectual wing of the Republican party, along with some former Bush administration officials from both presidencies, a few elected Republicans in Congress, and editorial writers in heretofore rock-ribbed Republican newspapers.<sup>1</sup> All earned the disdain, if not wrath, of the Republican party-in-the-electorate.

But while the alienation of Republican voters and displaced blue-collar workers can make for a powerful *electoral* coalition it does not make for a powerful *governing* one. As Yuval Levin notes, "The sense of lacking a stake in the nation's governing institutions—the feeling that those institutions are remote and unresponsive—makes it difficult to know what to do when they fall into your possession" (Levin 2017). The result is a disjunction between an electoral coalition built on resentments and a governing coalition that wants to extend the Reagan agenda far beyond its original intent.

## 6. The Faustian Bargain

Donald Trump's 2016 win, with its accompanying GOP congressional majorities at both the national and state levels, was historic. It left the Democratic party in its most weakened position *since 1922*. Consider: when Obama won the White House in 2008, Democrats controlled 62 of the nation's 98 partisan legislative chambers; today, Republicans have majorities in 67 (Podhoretz and Rothman 2016 and Hollingsworth 2016). Between Obama's election in 2008, and his exiting the presidency in 2017, more than 1,100 Democratic officials lost their jobs (Podhoretz and Rothman 2016). Democrats shed eleven seats in the U.S. Senate, sixty House seats, fourteen governorships, and *nine-hundred* state legislative seats. Come 2018, Democrats face an initially daunting task: in 10 states won by Trump, incumbent Democratic senators must defend their seats against Republican challengers. Likewise, Democrats must compete in House districts gerrymandered by the GOP.

Republicans realize that a Trump presidency gives them a history-making opportunity to achieve long-sought GOP goals—including rewriting the tax code, eliminating Obamacare, cutting the flow of immigration, and limiting domestic spending, while at the same time approving vast increases for national defense. Speaking in favor of eliminating Obamacare and his proposal to replace it, House Speaker Paul Ryan bragged: "This is a monumental, exciting conservative reform. I've been working on this for twenty years. This is exciting. This is what we've been dreaming

<sup>1</sup>These included William Kristol, George F. Will, Max Boot, John Podhoretz, Colin Powell, Condoleeza Rice, Brent Scowcroft, Ari Fleischer, Senators Mark Kirk, Dean Heller, Mike Lee, Susan Collins, Ben Sasse, and Jeff Flake, and editorial writers for the *Dallas Morning News*, *Arizona Republic*, *Detroit Free Press*, and *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Even *USA Today*, which had never endorsed any presidential candidate, said Trump was unacceptable.

about doing” (Viebeck et. al., 2017). Meanwhile, congressional Republicans remain aware of Trump’s profound hold on their fellow partisans. According to Gallup, 84 percent of Republicans are in lock-step behind Trump, while Democratic approval stands at a mere 7 percent (Saad 2017). Using a business analogy, the Republican party has been subjected to a hostile takeover, and is now the party of Donald J. Trump.

Yet this takeover carries with it extreme risks. Even at this early stage of the Trump presidency, it is increasingly clear that the Republican party has made a Faustian bargain with their new Commander-in-Chief. Trump’s tweeting is disapproved by 59 percent of all Americans, including 40 percent of Republicans (*USA Today*/Suffolk University 2017). Repealing and replacing Obamacare is in trouble on Capitol Hill, as 58 percent of Americans either want to keep Obamacare or improve it, and just 20 percent support the Republican-sponsored American Health Care Act (Quinnipiac University 2017). Revelations abound about the Trump campaign’s Russian dealings, including reports that reach into the innermost White House. And Trump has made outlandish claims that Barack Obama authorized wiretaps within the confines of Trump Tower during the 2016 campaign—charges that infuriated Obama and his associates, and were rejected by Obama’s Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, and even FBI Director James Comey whom Trump later fired. When Quinnipiac University asked respondents what word came to mind when asked to think of Donald Trump, the top three responses were “idiot” (39 percent), “incompetent” (31 percent), and “liar” (30 percent) (Quinnipiac University 2017).

In 2016, the Republican party was transformed into a Hertz Rent-A-Car with Donald Trump as its driver. Trump is now driving the Republican party, but toward what end? He has given the GOP an opportunity to achieve long-sought goals, even as the party disagrees with him on foreign policy (especially toward Russia), worries about large increases in discretionary infrastructure spending, has qualms about repealing existing trade agreements, frets about the imposition of a border tax, is lukewarm (at best) about building a wall on the U.S.-Mexican border, and cannot find existing monies to pay for it.

Trump’s 2016 win came as a result of extracting more downscale, rural white voters to the polls, even as many moderate, well-educated, suburban voters recoiled from him. In 1960, 54 percent of those with high school degrees or less voted for John F. Kennedy, while 62 percent of those with college and postgraduate degrees supported Richard M. Nixon. By 2016, the situation was reversed: Trump won non-college whites by a record-setting 39 percentage points (besting Mitt Romney’s 25-point edge), while college educated whites backed Trump by a mere four-point margin (far below Romney’s 14-point lead) (Edsall 2017). In Madison County, Ohio, an exurban area outside Columbus, Trump’s beat Clinton by an astounding 39.8 points (Plouffe 2016). Trump ranked up similar margins in rural, non-college, largely white and rural communities in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan that allowed him to win an Electoral College majority. His victory occurred despite the fact that the percentage of white voters without college degrees fell from 83 percent in 1960 to just 34 percent in 2016 (Edsall 2016).

In an influential book titled *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, Charles Murray describes two distinctive communities that epitomize the political and cultural divides that characterized the Trump-Clinton contest:

< *Belmont*: Everybody has a bachelor’s or graduate degree and works in the high-prestige professions or management, or is married to such a person.

< *Fishtown*: Nobody has more than a high school diploma. Everybody who has an occupation is in a blue-collar job, mid-or low-level service job, or a low-level white-collar job (Murray 2012, 146).

The Trump presidency promises to accentuate the differences between these two Americas. This poses challenges for both parties, but particularly for Republicans who, historically, have relied on highly-educated, upper income voters as a bedrock of support. In 2016, Hillary Clinton nearly beat Trump among voters who made \$250,000 or more (46 percent to 48 percent) (Edison Research 2016). And in the all-important prosperous suburbs of Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, and Denver, Clinton won strong backing—almost enough to carry Pennsylvania and Georgia, and enough to ensure victories in Virginia and Colorado. As Table 1 demonstrates, differences between non-college and college-educated voters are deepening as we enter the Trump years.

Table 1. Differences between non-college and college-educated voters are deepening as we enter the Trump years

Issue	Whites with a College Degree	Whites without a College Degree	Difference
Oppose removal of climate change regulations	67	51	16
Oppose efforts to repeal Obamacare	56	33	23
Think Trump too aggressive on immigration	51	31	20
More acceptance of transgenders is a good thing	51	30	21
Oppose higher spending on the military	56	36	20
Oppose reducing taxes “across the board”	46	29	17
Oppose suspending immigration from “terror prone” regions	59	36	23
Disapprove of Trump’s policy on Russia	59	35	24

Source: Quinnipiac University, poll, March 2-6, 2017.

But as Trump’s presidency continues to unfold, the once-Republican bastion of white, college-educated voters continues to drift away from Trump, and whites with a high school diploma (or less) are becoming increasingly disillusioned. Today, 59 percent of white college-educated voters disapprove of Trump’s performance; only 36 percent approve. Among non-college-educated whites, the figures have declined to a statistical tie: 47 percent approve; 46 percent disapprove (Quinnipiac University 2017). As Trump proposes a budget that threatens to slash government spending in poor, rural communities with harsh cuts in Medicaid funding, the disconnect between Trump’s rural Main Street and establishment-minded Republicans’ Wall Street grows ever larger. In retrospect, it is clear just how much the Republican party depended on Hillary Clinton prevailing in 2016, as the various wings of the GOP would have been united in opposition to her even as they fretted about the future.

### 7. Jimmy Carter Redux? The Disjunctive Presidency Revisited

The Trump presidency may result not merely in a personal failure, but presents a mortal threat to the Republican party itself. Conservative *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat likens Donald Trump to Jimmy Carter. Employing Stephen Skowronek’s model of presidential time, Douthat believes that Trump is a disjunctive president whose administration is presiding over a dying Republican majority created by Ronald Reagan (Douthat 2017). In Douthat’s formulation, Trump resembles Jimmy Carter who also presided over a dying order. Assuming the presidency in 1977, Carter tried to straddle a growing chasm between a dying New Deal, whose workhorses still dominated the halls of Congress, and a growing belief among voters (including many Democrats) that Big Government no longer worked. As Carter phrased it during the campaign in words that could have been easily used by Donald Trump:

My critics ... want to stop the people of this country from regaining control of their government. They want to preserve the status quo, to preserve politics as usual, to maintain at all costs their own entrenched, unresponsive, bankrupt, irresponsible political power (Skowronek 1997, 376).

As Skowronek noted, Carter “landed in Washington tenuously attached to a governing establishment that itself appeared dangerously out of step with the most urgent questions of the day, and like his counterparts in political time, he struggled haplessly in that awkward position just to bring his credibility as a national leader into focus” (Skowronek 1997, 366). Forty years later, much the same could be said about Donald Trump.

Carter’s failed presidency led to Ronald Reagan’s rise and the creation of a new political order. Today, Stephen Skowronek sees strong parallels between Carter’s disjunctive presidency and Donald Trump’s presumed one:

The most profound thing said by Donald Trump was at the Republican National Convention in July: “I alone can fix it.” That was a tell-tale sign of what kind of president he will be. He was saying, “I’m not going to rely on my own party to do this.” That smacks of Jimmy Carter, who distanced himself from his fellow Democrats by asking, “Why not the best?” The kind of president who reigns over the end of his party’s own orthodoxy is always a guy with no relationship to his

party establishment, someone who catches popular mood and says he is going to do it all by himself. Someone like Herbert Hoover, who carefully cultivated his own political brand and image as a “wonder boy”—the guy who can fix anything. Disjunctive presidents are always loners. If Trump is not Andrew Jackson, and if he is Jimmy Carter, then Paul Ryan is Ted Kennedy circa 1978 (Kreitner 2016).

As the Trump presidency unfolds, Reihan Salam sees a disjunctive presidency taking shape as the widening gulf emerges between those occupying key positions in the Trump administration and those voters who backed him:

So far, Trump is staffing his administration with pretty much the same Reaganites who would have served under Jeb Bush, his favorite globalist foil. You could say that Trump won a premature political victory. Republican voters were ready for a cross-class, nationalist appeal, but today’s elite Republicans, who cut their teeth in the makers and takers era, appear to be completely uninterested in giving it to them. And the president-elect himself hasn’t been acting particularly transformative. Trump’s personnel decisions in the past two months suggest he intends to do nothing more than layer a candy-covered nationalist shell over the chocolate-covered peanut that is Reaganism. Add a few well-timed, angry tweets and a few bread-and-circus-like gestures, like the Carrier deal, and you’re good to go. We may very well have a transformative nationalist president in our lifetime, who will draw on ideas from the right and left. It’s just not going to be Donald Trump (Salam 2017).

Ross Douthat concurs: “Alas, as anyone on Twitter is regularly reminded, focus, attention, and judiciousness are all qualities that this disjunctive president lacks. Which is why, even though nothing is inevitable, the Carter precedent—a majority wasted and then lost—looms as this administration’s most likely destination” (Douthat 2017). Four months into the new administration, political scientist Matthew R. Kerbel sees congressional Republicans being squeezed “by a base that remains loyal to Trump and an energized resistance movement threatening to overwhelm them at the polls. . . . It is as though Republicans feel they are on the Titanic in the moments after striking the iceberg, scrambling for a solution that isn’t there and watching their fate reveals itself in slow motion. Their [current] silence isn’t a sign that they are ignorant of the stakes. To the contrary, Republicans know quite well what’s happening. But there are no good options, and they don’t know what to do” (Kerbel 2017).

In the early days of his presidency, Trump continued to revel in his 2016 election triumph, a victory whose future may be difficult, if not impossible, to replicate. James David Barber once wrote that presidential elections rotate in cycles of conflict, conscience and conciliation. Undoubtedly, Barber would place the 2016 campaign in the first category, describing the politics of conflict as “a battle for power,” adding: “Like a real war, the political war is a rousing call to arms. Candidates mobilize their forces for showdowns and shoot-outs, blasting each other with rhetorical volleys. It is a risky adventure; its driving force is surprise, as the fortunes of combat deliver setbacks and breakthroughs contrary to the going expectation, and the contenders struggle to recover and exploit the sudden changes. It is the myth of the fighting candidate. It is John Wayne galloping over the horizon as head of the calvary troop, just as the Indians are about to descend on the settlement” (Barber 1992, 3). Donald Trump was clearly suited for just such an election. But Barber adds that what ordinarily follows is a “politics as conscience”:

Over the next four years, reaction sets in. Uplift is called for. Political conflict seems more and more like mere “politics,” in the low sense of stab and grab, a clash of merely selfish interests. Attention focuses on the dangers of blind ambition, corruption, even tyranny, the degeneration of politics into a gut-level contest for preference and place, culminating in rule by the most aggressive of the feral few, the politics of the jungle. It is time to remember that America is God’s country, founded for a high purpose. The call goes out for a revival of social conscience, the restoration of the constitutional covenant, missionary zeal emerges. In our relatively unideological politics, relatively simple moral verities are invoked and applied to the search for a President who, in his very person, embodies strong character and visceral American values (Barber 1992, 3-4).

Donald Trump seems singularly unsuited for such a contest, should Barber’s model prove correct.

## 8. Conclusion

Even before the first-hundred days of the Trump presidency ended, the country was suffering from premature exhaustion. As Mark Danner wrote in *The New York Review of Books*:

[I]t is clear, a month into Trump's ascension, that we are all his prisoners, held fast in the projected drama of his mind. As the battle over that new political order is enacted on the national stage, we have all become the dragooned antagonists in the play. This is what it is to live in the realm of the Big Man: his drama performance is ours. Relentless political struggle, permanent revolution, shattering of norms, scandal and controversy, the capital hip-deep in broken crockery: this is what his supporters signed on for and this is what he is determined to give them; perhaps he knows how to give them little else (Danner 2017, 4).

Across the globe, once-stable party systems—including that of Great Britain—have been fractured and once-major parties placed on life support. While Democrats bemoan their reduced status, it is likely that the party will rebound in 2018, as voters seek to put the brakes on a disjunctive Trump—a typical outcome of midterm elections—as Bill Clinton in 1994, and Barack Obama in 2010 and 2014, can attest.

This doesn't mean that Democrats are poised to regain the presidency, or that they will find their own Ronald Reagan, or that the party can rely on changing demographics alone to win. Democrats are cognizant of this, and there is a widespread acknowledgment within intra-party circles that much work needs to be done in advance of the 2020 election. Indeed, Democrats would be well-advised to nominate a candidate whose personal qualities are the opposite of Trump. As one astute Democrat, contemplating the first 50 days of the Trump administration, put it: "The American people are going to need a nap soon. A good candidate in 2020 would be solid, stolid, reassuring, and calm" (Allen 2017). Others believe that the Democratic party should place greater emphasis on progressive principles and nominate a candidate who can identify with the party's changing demography *and* enunciate a core set of liberal values and policies that are in tune with the current era. Prior to the 2016 election, Stanley Greenberg wrote that present-day politics was akin to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Progressives gradually set an agenda that covered four straight elections (1900-1912) and three presidents (William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson) (Greenberg 2015, 279). Today, Greenberg believes that the movement toward a new progressivism centered in the Democratic party is on steroids. Time will tell. But one thing is certain: change is a constant in American politics, and only the shape of the changes yet to come remain unclear.

But while the Democrats have their troubles and many obstacles lie ahead, the risks to the Republican party are even greater. The death of the Reagan era, and GOP establishment that grew from it, has profound consequences for Republicans and all Americans. In 1950, the American Political Science Association-sanctioned Committee on Political Parties wrote:

When the President's program actually is the sole program..., either his party becomes a flock of sheep or the party falls apart. In effect, this concept of the presidency disperses the party system by making the President reach directly for the support of a majority of the voters. It favors a President who exploits skillfully the arts of demagoguery, who sees the whole country as his political backyard, and who does not mind turning into the embodiment of personal government (Committee on Political Parties 1950, 93).

The Committee's dire warning about the consequences of party weakness (which accompanies disjunctive presidents) has acquired a new-found relevance. It was a flaccid Republican leadership that failed to stop Donald Trump. And with Trump has come profound risks that, with the passage of time, may become more apparent—perhaps even leading to his impeachment and premature termination from office. As the drama of the Trump presidency unfolds (and increases)—and as Americans continue to question both his temperament and judgment—the threats to the Republican party become ever more real and the consequences even more dire.

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