

## THE SATURDAY ESSAY

# How Trump Has Changed the Republicans

The president has reshaped the GOP in his own image, and a new generation of conservatives is trying to learn and extend the lessons of his insurgent rise

By [Gerald F. Seib](#)

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For almost four decades, the conservative movement was defined by one man, Ronald Reagan, and his movement, the Reagan Revolution.

Reagan was an unlikely revolutionary figure, a modestly successful actor with a self-effacing style and no intellectual pretensions. Yet he personally made the Republican Party into a conservative party, and his legacy inspired the movement's leaders, animated its policy debates and stirred its voters' emotions long after he left the scene.

Then four years ago, it all changed.

Donald Trump ran in 2016 and swamped a sprawling Republican field of more conventional conservatives. In doing so, he didn't merely win the nomination and embark on the road to the White House. He turned Republicans away from four decades of Reagan-style, national-greatness conservatism to a new gospel of populism and nationalism.

In truth, this shift had been building for a while: Pat Buchanan, Ross Perot, Sarah Palin, Mike Huckabee, the Tea Party, an increasingly bitter immigration debate—all were early signs that a new door was opening. Mr. Trump simply charged through it. He understood better than those whom he vanquished in the primaries that the Republican Party has undergone profound socioeconomic changes; it has been washed over by currents of cultural alienation and a feeling that the old conservative economic prescriptions haven't worked for its new working-class foot soldiers.



Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin during a campaign speech, Clearwater, Fla., Oct. 6, 2008.

PHOTO: CHRIS O'MEARA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Now, as Republicans prepare to nominate Mr. Trump for re-election at their truncated convention this week, there is simply no way to put Trumpism back into the bottle. If the president wins this fall (and even more so if he loses), the question that Republicans in general and conservatives in particular face is simple and stark: How to adapt their gospel so that it fits in the age of Trump?

As it happens, a new and younger breed of conservatives has set out to do precisely that, often by stepping away from strict free-market philosophies. Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida is pushing for what he calls a “common-good capitalism,” in which government policies promote not just economic growth but also provide help for families, workers and communities. Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri, a likely presidential aspirant, is calling for leaving the World Trade Organization and managing capital markets to control the inflow of foreign money into the U.S.

## **A new conservative think tank advocates ‘industrial policy’—a concept long heretical in free-market circles.**

Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina, the lone Black Republican senator, has ushered into law a plan to use government incentives to lure investment dollars into underserved communities. Yuval Levin, a former George W. Bush White House aide, publishes a new-wave conservative journal and advocates for government programs specifically crafted to help young parents. Oren Cass, a young conservative intellectual, recently launched a new

think tank, American Compass, from which he advocates an “industrial policy” that gives specific government help to manufacturing firms—a concept long heretical in free-market circles.

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*How has President Trump altered the definition of what it means to be conservative? Join the conversation below.*

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Former South Carolina governor and U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley—another likely future White House hopeful—has her own think tank promoting a more conventional, Republican interventionist version of foreign policy. Meanwhile, the U.S.-educated Israeli philosopher Yoram Hazony is beating the drum for a Trumpian embrace of a nationalist foreign policy.

From many of these new-wave Republicans, the message is this: Conservatives faltered over time by becoming too enamored of their own ideology, too committed to globalization and free trade, and too indifferent to their effects on average working Americans. Looking past the Trump era, these conservatives argue, their movement needs to climb down from the ivory tower of hands-off economic theory and create a more practical conservatism that somehow embraces populism and nationalism, while seeking to retain core elements of free-market economics and Reagan’s “peace through strength” brand of internationalism.

Christopher DeMuth, a former president of the American Enterprise Institute who is now a fellow at the Hudson Institute, says that much of today’s ferment can be traced to conservatives growing insular and losing touch with voters, especially on trade and economic hardship. “‘Washington consensus’ conservatism was much too smug on these matters, and much too detached from a lot of pain and suffering that was going on in the country,” he says.

That realization, Mr. DeMuth says, has led many conservatives to rethink their adherence to small-government policies and open their minds to a bigger role for government in attacking economic problems. Increasingly, he says, some Republicans have a new attitude: “This thing about conservatives not wanting to use government power? We’ve got big problems out there, and damn it, we’re going to use government power to fix it.”

Mr. Trump certainly doesn't cling to intellectual principles in his governing style. His approach is instinctual. When he briefly contemplated entering the 2012 presidential race, he talked periodically about the idea with the conservative political activist David Bossie. At one point, Mr. Bossie told his friend Steve Bannon, with whom he had worked on some controversial films, that the New York billionaire was considering running for president.

"Of what country?" Mr. Bannon recalls replying.



Republican presidential hopeful Pat Buchanan during his insurgent run against President George H.W. Bush, Exeter, N.H., Feb. 17, 1992.

PHOTO: JIM COLE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Still, Mr. Bannon agreed to accompany Mr. Bossie to a meeting with Mr. Trump in New York City to talk through the possibilities. Once there, Mr. Bossie provided an overview of the political message of his idol, Ronald Reagan. He then turned to Mr. Bannon, who argued that the times required a much more populist approach than Reagan's, invoking such insurgent figures as Mr. Buchanan, Mr. Perot and even William Jennings Bryan in doing so. "That's the populist message," said Mr. Bannon, who was in the news again as he was indicted Thursday for alleged fraud involving a fund-raising campaign to help build the Trump-inspired border wall with Mexico.

Mr. Bannon recalls Mr. Trump responding enthusiastically, saying, "That's what I am: a popularist." Later, Mr. Bannon concluded that—mangled terminology aside—the mogul was right. Mr. Trump would set out to be a popular populist, and "the seed was planted."

When that seed sprouted, it produced a kind of identity crisis for traditional conservatives. They have long preached the economic virtues of immigration; Mr. Trump

doesn't buy it. Conservatives seek to reduce government spending; Mr. Trump was overseeing a trillion-dollar federal budget deficit even before the coronavirus hit. Conservatives preach limited executive power, but Mr. Trump has embraced an expansive view of presidential reach. During the pandemic and this summer's racial unrest, he has issued executive actions to send out government benefits that Congress failed to approve and simply declared that he has the power to override governors' decisions and send federal forces into their states even if they don't want them there—a far cry from Reagan's frequent invocation of the Tenth Amendment, which grants states powers not specifically enumerated for the federal government.

## **'He's not a conservative. He didn't sit around reading National Review.'**

— Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich on President Trump

As former House Speaker Newt Gingrich says of Mr. Trump, “He’s not a conservative. He didn’t sit around reading National Review,” the traditional conservative magazine. Instead, Mr. Gingrich defines Mr. Trump more in cultural terms than ideological ones, calling the president “an anti-liberal...a commonsense, practical person who understands how much of modern political correctness is just total baloney.”

When asked whether Mr. Trump is a conservative, Corey Lewandowski, his campaign manager for a time in 2016, says, “He’s a pragmatist.”

Among other things, this means that Mr. Trump simply doesn't have the same sympathy toward traditional big-business positions in favor of open trade, which business leaders see as the best way for a mature economy such as America's to continue growing. The shift became obvious during the 2016 campaign, when the U.S. Chamber of Commerce—the traditional bastion of big-business sentiment and sensibility, and normally a reliable ally of Republicans—attacked candidate Trump and was, in turn, attacked by him.

At one point during the race, the chamber's president, Thomas Donohue, called out Mr. Trump by name, saying he “has very little idea about what trade really is.” When candidate Trump became President Trump, he didn't forget. Early on, aides sent out the word: No Chamber of Commerce officials would be hired for the administration (an edict that didn't last). In hopes of smoothing over relations, a White House aide invited the chamber to send a representative to a meeting Mr. Trump was holding with business

leaders to discuss his agenda. Mr. Trump had too much antipathy toward Mr. Donohue to invite him to represent the group, so Thomas Collamore, the group's longtime executive vice president, drew the assignment instead.

Mr. Collamore knew that he might be heading into hostile territory, so he sought to make his presence low-key. At the outset of the meeting, with a contingent of White House reporters and network cameras in the room to catch a few minutes of the session, the business representatives each, in turn, identified themselves. Mr. Collamore dutifully did so. Then the president shooed away the press and turned to Mr. Collamore. "Hey, chamber guy," he said. "What's the problem with you guys?"

Mr. Trump's departure from the national-security precepts of the neoconservatives whom Mr. Reagan brought into the party is just as profound. Mr. Trump simply doesn't share their hawkish worldview or their belief in the necessity of U.S. international engagement.



President Trump during a press conference on the second day of the NATO summit in Brussels, July 12, 2018.

PHOTO: CHRISTIAN BRUNA/EPA-EFE/SHUTTERSTOCK

In the summer of 2018, for example, Mr. Trump came far closer than is publicly known to simply withdrawing the U.S. from the crown jewel of its military alliances, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. At a summit meeting in Brussels, Mr. Trump was so critical of what he considered the alliance's unfair reliance on the American military, and even of the amount of money NATO had spent on a new headquarters building, that his fellow leaders convened a special, closed session to discuss his grievances.



National security adviser John Bolton accompanied Mr. Trump to the meeting, which turned tense and testy. At one point, Mr. Bolton called White House chief of staff John Kelly, a retired four-star Marine general, who had intended to skip the meeting to tend to other business, and told him: *You'd better get over here. We're about to withdraw from NATO.*

## **Trump was considering simply declaring that the U.S. was out of the NATO alliance.**

Mr. Kelly hustled to Mr. Trump's side and found that the president was, in fact, considering simply declaring that the U.S. was out of the alliance. Mr. Kelly talked the president off that ledge, in part, by convincing him that he would be crucified by the political establishment and the press if he wrecked NATO. But some Trump aides remained worried that he still might pull the plug on NATO at some point.

Those attitudes seem to represent instinct more than a governing philosophy, so some conservatives are trying to construct a philosophy around them.

Mr. Cass of American Compass is one of them. "I see myself as engaged in the project of post-Trumpism," he says. In that post-Trump era, he argues, conservatives must move beyond their instinct that market forces and a light government hand automatically offer the best answers. "What we call conservative economic policy isn't actually small-c conservative in its orientation," he says. "It's libertarian economic policy."

Mr. Cass argues that free markets don't allocate resources well across all sectors of an economy. Specifically, markets leave some important sectors—including manufacturing—without sufficient investment. "Manufacturing provides particularly well-paying, stable employment—especially for men with less formal education," he said in remarks last year. "Manufacturing also tends to deliver faster productivity growth, because its processes are susceptible to technological advances that complement labor and increase output."

Thus, Mr. Cass argues, government should have policies that actively favor the expansion of manufacturing, including funding more research that can help manufacturing companies; giving engineering majors in colleges more government aid than, say, English majors; putting a "bias" in the tax code to help manufacturers; reducing—to nearly zero if

necessary—the number of visas given to Chinese students until China changes policies that harm American companies; and requiring U.S.-made components in key products. “In the real world as we find it, America has no choice but to adopt an industrial policy, and we will be better for it,” Mr. Cass said.

Similarly, Mr. Rubio has decried what he calls a misplaced conservative “obsession” with economic efficiency. Economics and culture “are strongly intertwined,” the Florida senator argued recently in a speech at Catholic University. What’s needed, he said, is a system that creates greater incentives for businesses to create “dignified work” that strengthens the families and the kind of culture so important to conservatives. “Our current government policies get this wrong,” he said. “We reward and incentivize certain business practices that promote economic growth—but it’s growth that often solely benefits shareholders at the expense of new jobs and better pay.”

For his part, Mr. Hawley has proposed having the government subsidize employers’ entire payrolls during the coronavirus crisis, paying 80% of workers’ wages up to the national median wage, on the theory that conservatives’ goal right now should be keeping workers above water during a crisis not of their own making.

## **‘The broad conservative public is ready for nationalism.’**

— Yoram Hazony, Israeli political theorist

Mr. Hazony makes a similar argument when it comes to foreign policy. He contends that cultural and religious values should be as important as globalization, which means that clear borders and a nation’s cultural identity must be seen as core values of a new conservative philosophy. He convened a conference in Washington last year to explore such ideas. “What we’re trying to do is unite the broad public and the elites as much as possible,” he says. “The broad conservative public is ready for nationalism. That’s the reason they voted for Donald Trump. That’s the reason they voted for Brexit.”

Ms. Haley, a likely 2024 presidential candidate, is also striking a nationalist tone, stressing the need for strong borders. But she appears to be betting on a return to a more traditional Reagan-esque posture, railing regularly against the Chinese Communist Party, arguing for an activist policy to counter Venezuela’s socialist government and lamenting Congress’ “irresponsible spending” on the coronavirus.



Some religious conservatives are doing a different kind of rethinking, considering how to best preserve the culture they value—and whether they have been looking in the wrong place for answers. Author Rod Dreher, who writes for American Conservative magazine, says that he and other religious conservatives were “shocked” and “demoralized” when the Supreme Court, in a decision written by a Trump appointee, ruled recently that civil rights law protects gay people from workplace discrimination. “We on the religious right have wrongly prioritized law and politics as what are important to us,” he concludes. “What is important to us is the culture.”

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Mr. Rubio tried to address the dissatisfaction with traditional conservative prescriptions in his own 2016 campaign—and, as the son of Cuban immigrants, did so without all of the Trumpian nativist overtones. But he found his message drowned out by Mr. Trump’s megaphone and maelstrom. Now he thinks that the anger at the economic status quo and the political establishment is a sign that America—not just the conservative movement—has reached a crossroads.

“If you look at human history, when these sentiments are not addressed, people throughout history always tend to go in one of two directions,” Mr. Rubio says. “Socialism—let the government take over everything and make things right—or ethnic nationalism, which is, ‘Bad things are happening to me, and it’s someone else’s fault. And they happen to be from another country or another skin color.’

“Neither one of those ends up in a good place. And both are actually a fundamental challenge to the very concept of America, what makes us unique and special.”

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*—Mr. Seib is The Wall Street Journal’s executive Washington editor. This essay is adapted from his new book, “We Should Have Seen It Coming: From Reagan to Trump—A Front-Row Seat to a Political Revolution,” which will be published Aug. 25 by Random House.*

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