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Donald Trump won't let go of the GOP. But Republicans must turn the page | Opinion

4-minute read

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Aside from occupying the White House itself, former President Donald Trump is exactly where he wants to be — at the center of the national political dialogue, a dominating media presence and a controlling influence in the selection of a Republican presidential nominee in 2024.

He was impeached twice, lost reelection to an opponent who seldom left his basement, remains under at least two Department of Justice investigations, is the subject of civil and criminal inquiries into his personal and business dealings, and stands accused of encouraging a violent assault on the U.S. Capitol two years ago.

Despite what appears to be insurmountable baggage, he leads the field of potential Republican nominees and in some polls holds a lead over President Joe Biden in a hypothetical 2024 contest.

By any measure, his status is extraordinary, a testament to the most massive ego in modern political history and to the overwhelming power of social media, which has supplanted traditional media as the primary source of news while trafficking in rumor, conjecture, analysis, scrutiny, informed and uninformed opinion and conspiracy theories.

For the Republican Party establishment, sensing an opportunity to regain the presidency and control of Congress, Trump is a monumental problem, the essence of a deep fear that his candidacy would drag the party to crushing defeat.

A campaign whose central theme would be allegations of a fraudulent 2020 election produces heartburn among top party leadership, who blame the former president for the dismal showing in last November's congressional midterm elections, in which most of Trump's endorsed candidates were defeated.

Trump's hold on a portion of the party base remains fairly strong, but signs of erosion have surfaced, notably polling that reveals a majority of Republicans prefer someone other than him as the candidate.

His most recent rallies were held in small venues to avoid televised coverage of rows of empty seats, and, though the audiences were responsive, the atmosphere lacked the energy, passion and electricity of past appearances.

Increasingly, leading Republicans have broken their silence and become more outspoken in their criticism of Trump, calling for new generational leadership, while major donors, including the powerful Americans for Prosperity advocacy group, funded by billionaire Charles Koch, have indicated withholding support.

The decision by AFP is particularly noteworthy, marking the first time it has involved itself in a presidential primary and, without naming Trump, couldn't have been more direct in its reasoning:

“The hard truth is the Republican Party is nominating bad candidates” or “The best thing for the country would be to have a president in 2025 who represents a new chapter” or “The American people have shown they are ready to move on” or “We will support a candidate who can win and lead the country forward.”

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There was no reason to identify Trump; no translation necessary to understand it was “Never Trump” writ large.

Other advocacy groups are likely to follow suit and adopt a similar “turn the page” point of view.

Other potential candidates, while making coyly encouraging noises, have remained in a holding pattern, concerned about offending Trump's dedicated base or becoming a target for his vitriol.

Only former South Carolina Gov. and U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley has committed to a candidacy while speculation swirls around others, notably Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who is running a strong second to Trump in polls.

There is no question the former president's influence on the decisions and strategies of potential competitors is considerable. His frequent verbal grenades rolled into DeSantis' office await anyone who poses even a minimal threat.

Party leaders, however, can no longer stand by, wringing their hands and bemoaning the disaster that awaits if Trump repeats his feat of 2016, when he navigated a field of 16 candidates who splintered party support in the primary election grind and opened the path for him to secure the nomination.

Difficult though it may be, it is imperative the establishment shrink the field and convey to potential candidates whose appeal is narrow that they should put their ambitions aside in

furtherance of the larger and more crucial cause.

The primary season could assist in that winnowing, but the risk of Trump racking up small-margin victories from state to state — as he did in 2016 — until he's the last candidate standing remains genuine.

Marginal candidates — those who in early surveys of voters either fail to register or fall below 1% — are extreme long shots and should be encouraged to reassess their plans.

The odds are steep that former governors like Larry Hogan of Maryland, Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas and Chris Christie of New Jersey will be able to lock up significant support and financial resources to gain strength and a competitive edge.

The same outlook faces sitting governors like Glenn Youngkin of Virginia, Greg Abbott of Texas and Chris Sununu of New Hampshire.

Sens. Tim Scott of South Carolina and Ted Cruz of Texas are slightly better positioned, but their chances will be enhanced only by a decision to forgo a candidacy by DeSantis, Haley, former Vice President Mike Pence or former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

While discussions about one's future and placing plans and ambitions aside are difficult and often awkward, hard reality is a fact of political life, and facing up to it is crucial, especially when the stakes are as high as regaining the White House and securing a majority in Congress.

For his part, Trump will continue to bully and bluster, insulting his competitors, accusing them of being disloyal, embellishing and exaggerating his record and insisting he would have been reelected if only he had received a fair count.

He'll not be persuaded to stand down; his ego won't permit that. It is necessary to marginalize him, to construct a reality that he is no longer the controlling element, that events have passed him by, his relevance has vanished and he should follow.

AFP has offered an instructive model toward achieving those ends.

Trump may be where he wants to be at this early stage, but to suggest he is the party's savior is an attempt to rescue a drowning man by throwing him both ends of the rope.

If the party relies on that attempt, it will slip beneath the surface. And deservedly so.

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