

A conservative in the Age of Trump

By Daniel Pipes

Many conservatives who once found Donald Trump unpalatable have come around to accept him. Most famously, Mitt Romney once excoriated Trump as dishonest, “a phony, a fraud,” and condemned his bullying, greed, showing off, and misogyny. After the presidential election, however, Romney praised Trump (“I look forward to the coming administration”) and hoped to work for him.

This change of heart has not been limited to job applicants. The president-elect’s many qualities that conservatives once condemned have disappeared down memory hole, to the point that recalling them is akin to making rude noises during a prayer service.

Instead, Republicans are in a mood of optimism, even ecstasy, celebrating Trump’s unconventional and holding him up as the only candidate who could have defeated the despised Hillary Clinton. As House Speaker Paul Ryan put it, “Trump heard a voice out in this country that no one else heard,” enabling him to accomplish the “most incredible political feat” Ryan has ever witnessed.

Personally, I did not vote for Trump but did prefer that he win. Since the election, I am glad to see he has recognized that, as an outsider to Washington, he needs cabinet members (with the inexplicable exception of the secretary of state) who know the ropes. I am even more pleased with Trump’s many appointees ready to for-



James Mattis, defense secretary nominee. AP

ward a conservative agenda, especially ones ready to disagree with the boss.

James Mattis will end social experimentation with the military and return to its war-making mission. Jeff Sessions will consistently apply the rule of law. Steven Mnuchin will simplify the tax code. Tom Price will undo Obamacare. Betsy DeVos will focus on the interests of students rather than of teachers and bureaucrats. Andy Puzder will prune back regulations obstructing job growth. John Kelly will secure the borders. David Friedman will

revive U.S.-Israel relations.

But two giant caveats remain, both pertaining to character.

First, what Trump gives, he can take away. As an egomaniac with enormous political latitude and no consistent ideology, he could, for any or no reason, sack these worthy cabinet members and replace them with technocrats. Worse, he can freely discard his current conservative orientation. His chief strategist, Steve Bannon, once boasted that “we’re going to build an entirely new political movement. It’s everything related to jobs. The conservatives are going to go crazy.” Trump himself has warned that nothing he has specified so far commits him: “Anything I say right now — I’m not the president — everything is a suggestion. ... I’m always flexible on issues.”

Second, much depends on whether the office of the presidency tames Trump or he continues with his old ways. Colin Dueck of George Mason University suggests that Trump has the bravado of a real-estate developer who adopts maximalist rhetorical positions but “is not actually about to implement every off-the-cuff statement.” Maybe.

But the qualities that appalled so many Americans remain and, indeed, have been massively vindicated. Trump reached the ultimate prize by staying true to himself; also, 70-year-olds tend not to change much. It’s entirely possible he will continue to attack individuals and companies, obsess over grievances, insult the press, make flamboyantly reck-

less or false statements, display defiant ignorance, engage in dubious business practices, resort to bravado litigiousness, and pursue wildly inconsistent policies.

At best, Trump will be to Barack Obama what Ronald Reagan was to Jimmy Carter, the leader of a national renewal of optimism and strength. At worst, his personal flaws will lead to social tensions, domestic disturbances, economic upheavals, and war. I am agnostic, having no clue where the country is heading. For me, America now resembles a monarchy whose incompetent but predictable king has died, and a rowdy, volatile son takes over.

As Trump becomes president, I wish him the best, for his sake and ours. I shall applaud when he does well (conversing with the president of Taiwan, thereby breaking with decades of moldy precedent) and condemn when he does badly (his “reckless and bizarre” conversation with the prime minister of Pakistan). I will aid his administration as best I can while keeping my distance from it, neither being part of it nor ever apologizing for it.

Trump’s appointments have earned him a conservative’s good will, but his character flaws prompt skepticism and worry. Let him now prove that he is worthy of the extraordinary position he soon will occupy.

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