

# The GOP's Trump Critics Are Only Sabotaging Themselves

The setting was perfect a year ago today as Senator Ted Cruz assumed the stage at the Republican National Convention and began delivering his long-anticipated address to the party faithful, practically all of whom were expecting the Texas senator to finally let bygones be bygones and utter the words "I am voting for Donald Trump for president and encourage you to do the same."

Instead Cruz briefly commended Trump for winning the GOP primaries, waxed on poetically about the beauty of the American constitutional system for several minutes and then advised everyone near the end of his talk to "vote your conscience" on Election Day.

I was driving home from a softball game at the time and listened to the final 95 percent of the speech (therefore I didn't see it, only heard it initially). Over the radio I could sense the hostile reaction from the audience and the commentators were saying something to the effect of "I've never seen this before, a speaker being booed off the stage."

What?

Needless to say, I didn't grasp it at first. In listening to the content of Cruz's speech it clearly constituted a scathing indictment of Hillary Clinton and the Democrats and made it plain that Cruz was in no way advocating for anyone to even consider voting for her. Neither did it sound like he was making a pitch for Americans to ponder ditching the Republican ticket in favor of Libertarian Gary Johnson or gulp, Green Party candidate Jill Stein either.

Therefore, by process of elimination, Cruz was essentially touting Trump. He just didn't say the words. What was so

plainly evident to me in listening to the speech on the radio apparently wasn't shared by anyone in Cleveland and definitely not by the chattering class. Pundits were predicting the moment would mark the beginning of the end of Cruz's career.

How could my perceptions from radio have been so different from those watching on TV or seeing it live? Was this the Nixon vs. Kennedy debate all over again (where people listening on the radio thought Nixon was the better candidate but TV viewers chose the much more camera-friendly JFK)?

In hindsight, the incident seems so awful. Cruz looked stunned as he assessed the audience's reaction. His nervous smile belied a man who must have been thinking, *Oh no, what have I done?* on the inside. Trump himself made an appearance in the arena at the close of Cruz's oration and gave a thumbs-up, which to this day has not been fully explained. I even thought maybe it was some kind of crazy conspiracy between The Donald and Cruz to generate mass media hysteria. Well, they got it (the media hysteria). It will remain a mystery.

What matters a year later is Cruz, after an appropriate amount of time, formally endorsed Trump. After Trump won last November Cruz even made a couple visits to Trump Tower and there were rumors he was being considered for the Attorney General position (which deservedly went to Jeff Sessions) or as a possibility to fill the Supreme Court vacancy (which of course went to Neil Gorsuch).

By all appearances Trump and Cruz have not only buried the hatchet, they've almost become friends (again). At least that's the way it looks. Time truly heals all wounds.

An election win helps. Cruz's political profile has also been predictably elevated by Trump's victory. Instead of being the hated (by some) anti-establishment crusader, Cruz has evolved into a principled negotiator and patient advocate for the conservative agenda in the Senate. Trump seems to appreciate

Cruz's efforts, and one can only imagine the two will continue to work together in the future for the good of the country.

I doubt the scars from the 2016 primaries will ever fully dissipate, but people move on. It's human nature.

Therefore, it seems like all's well in GOP-land now. Except maybe it doesn't.

Rebecca Berg of Real Clear Politics wrote, "During an eyebrow-raising visit to Iowa last week that stoked chatter about his potential presidential aspirations, Sen. Ben Sasse did something unusual and revealing: He did not mention President Trump.

"Speaking at a Story County Republican Party event in Nevada, Iowa, with the national media spotlight trained squarely upon him, Sasse might have used that platform to buck the president, as he has done many times previously. The Nebraska senator gained notoriety last year as one of a few Republicans to withhold his support for the party's nominee, instead urging a third-party alternative to Trump and Hillary Clinton. As most of the GOP coalesced around its candidate, if grudgingly, Sasse refused to budge – and made a lot of noise about it."

Sasse is still making "noise," though Berg's article made it clear the Nebraska senator has toned it down since Trump and family moved into the White House.

That doesn't mean Sasse has completely ceased sniping at his party's acknowledged leader, which has made him a cult hero to the nebulous #NeverTrump faction who for some reason sees the Nebraskan's off-the-wall antics as principled and non-partisan.

I, for one, think Sasse is childish and borderline-ridiculous, and his social media strategy is just a ploy to court the adoration of a media that despises Trump and eagerly provides

a platform for anyone who chooses to speak out against him. Sasse meets that description perfectly. As is well-known, Sasse didn't bother attending last year's convention, saying instead he planned to visit "dumpster fires" with his kids.

But the larger issue here is—why is Sasse in Iowa now? Sure, the Hawkeye State is just across the border from his own Nebraska, but it also happens to be the traditional first-in-the-nation state to vote in every presidential nominating cycle. Some are speculating Sasse is just laying the groundwork for a potential run for the big job in 2024, but what if he's more intent on making trouble in 2020?

The prospect of a primary challenge to Trump at this point looks as likely to succeed as Ted Cruz's ill-fated convention speech was last year—but with an outlier like Ben Sasse, you never know. Sasse has compiled a solid conservative Senate voting record and earned praise from several conservative organizations, yet any kind of contest to Trump after one term would be akin to Don Quixote chasing windmills in a vain attempt to impress his crush, Dulcinea.

Sasse might enjoy support from some in the conservative media such as Erick Erickson, Bill Kristol, Jonah Goldberg and the misguided people at RedState, but among the Republican Party faithful he'd be a non-entity, a gnat on the elephant's backside.

Still, there are those in the "conservative" world who argue the groundwork for a 2020 match-up with Trump needs to be laid now.

*National Review* executive editor Reihan Salam wrote in *The Dallas Morning News* last week, "As the events of the past few days remind us, however, it's not clear the president is all that deft when it comes to handling a bona fide political crisis, and tying yourself too closely to Trump's political fortunes is looking less and less like a safe bet. The

challenge is that if you're going to run for the GOP presidential nomination, you'll need to win over people who at one point or another supported Trump. That means there might be such a thing as being too eager to abandon the president outright. The decision to throw Trump under the bus will have to be made more in sorrow than in anger."

"How might Sasse and others in the same boat, such as Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, start ramping up their criticism? Raising questions about the propriety of keeping Jared Kushner as a senior adviser to the president might be a good place to start. Sticking up for Robert Mueller in his role as special counsel is a no-brainer. And if Trump and his allies can't right the ship in a week or two, and if the president starts bleeding GOP support? That's when the gloves can come off."

At first glance I thought this had to have been written by a Democrat. Would William F. Buckley, Jr., approve of what his editors are writing these days? Saying the "gloves can come off" if some wayward establishment Republican deems it an appropriate moment to go after a sitting Republican president who is more or less advancing the conservative agenda?

Where's John Kasich in all of this? Isn't he ready to jump in for 2020 too? Ever the opportunist, Kasich came out against the Senate bill to overhaul Obamacare because he wanted to hang on to his federal Medicaid subsidies. What a principled leader. Kasich embodies the swampy establishmentarian stereotype.

The bottom line is this: Republicans gain little or nothing by bailing on Trump. It didn't work for Ted Cruz at the Cleveland convention last year and won't have any better results today, either. Conservatives are onboard with Trump's agenda and it's time everyone started pulling for the right side. {eoa}

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