

Where Are the Republicans Who Put America First?

di Thomas L. Friedman

As President Trump and his administration head toward the midterm elections, it's now clear that the Republican Party has split into three factions: the "Never Trump" Republicans, who refuse to ever vote for this unethical man; the "America First" Republicans, who favor Trump's policies but won't countenance his destroying American norms and laws; and "Trump First" Republicans — those who think Trump's dictates come first and the Constitution and traditional norms come second.

The most alarming thing happening in America today is that the Trump First Republicans, on Trump's orders, are purging the few America First Republicans. So should the G.O.P. hold the House and the Senate in the midterms, there will be no brakes whatsoever on this party and this president. I would not at all rule out their pushing for a third Trump term. We are going to a very bad place.

Just look at the trend-line: The Never Trump Republicans, who included traditional conservatives like Liz Cheney, John McCain and Mitt Romney, did not believe in Trump the man or many of his ideas. They thought that he both dishonored the Constitution and true conservative principles. Alas, though, McCain died, Cheney was forced out of the party and Romney quit politics altogether. On Tuesday, another Trump antagonist in the Republican Party, Representative Thomas Massie of Kentucky, lost a primary to an opponent handpicked by the president.

The America First Republicans were ready to sign on to many Trump ideas — lowering taxes or limiting immigration or deflating the woke left — but when it came down to a choice between advancing those ideas and undermining democracy, this faction drew a red line. They put America first, not Trump first.

I am talking about people like former Vice President Mike Pence, Senator Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and the Indiana and South Carolina state legislators who refused to go

along with Trump's shameful out-of-cycle gerrymandering of electoral districts just to increase the G.O.P.'s odds of holding the House. But now they too are being driven from the party.

Cassidy, the two-term Republican who voted to convict Trump in his 2021 impeachment trial, was just defeated by a Trump First Republican in his primary. The back and forth between Cassidy and Trump was revealing. While he did not mention Trump by name in his concession speech, there was no doubt about whom Cassidy was talking about.

“Let me just set the record straight,” [Cassidy said](#). “Our country is not about one individual. It is about the welfare of all Americans, and it is about our Constitution. And if someone doesn't understand that and attempts to control others through using the levers of power, they're about serving themselves. They're not about serving us. And that person is not qualified to be a leader.”

Trump's response was more direct — and incredibly revealing. He wrote on social media of Cassidy: “His disloyalty to the man who got him elected is now a part of legend, and it's nice to see that his political career is OVER!”

Read those words carefully: “His disloyalty to the man” — not to the Constitution — is what got him defeated. Trump first.

Senator Lindsey Graham, who seems willing to abandon any principle he ever held to stay on Trump's good side and remain his golfing buddy, expressed the essence of the Trump First Republicans after Cassidy lost:

“You can disagree with President Trump,” [Graham said](#), “but if you try to destroy him, you're going to lose, because this is the party of Donald Trump.”

Read those words carefully, too: It is not the party of Republicans, it is “the party of Donald Trump,” which means it is whatever Trump says it is. But the most revealing part of Graham's quote was: “If you try to destroy him, you're going to lose.”

Translation: If you vote, as Cassidy did, to convict Trump after he was impeached for inciting an insurrection in our nation's capital in a shameful effort to overturn the free and fair 2020 election, it means you are trying to “destroy” Trump — not protect America.

For Graham, upholding the Constitution apparently equals trying to “destroy” a man, even when that man was attempting to destroy the most sacred principle of our Constitution: the peaceful transfer of power by elections.

Don’t worry, Lindsey, your place in Trump’s golf rotation is secure.

At least Cassidy is not alone in the America First G.O.P. wing. My colleague [David French wrote eloquently](#) about the Republican majority leader of the South Carolina Senate, Shane Massey, who last week [gave a speech](#) explaining why he would not go along with Trump’s personal request that he support a midterm gerrymander to eliminate the state’s only Democratic-held congressional district.

A reminder: The Constitution requires a census every 10 years and reapportionment of House seats among states based on the population changes. But it is silent on when states can redistrict. Some states explicitly limit redistricting to once per decade in line with the census and some have independent commissions that restrict when and how lines can be redrawn. But once-in-a-decade has been the norm in most states, because new census data was the natural trigger.

For Trump to order Republican-dominated states to redistrict on his whim — purely to manipulate the election outcome so the G.O.P. won’t lose the House in November under a president whose popularity is at record lows — may be technically legal under the Constitution, but it is pure cheating in my book. It is also pure Trump: Life is only about what you *can* do, never about what you *should* do.

Massey wasn’t buying it. He refused to be a party to that travesty in his state — and specifically he refused to wipe out Representative James Clyburn’s district. Clyburn is the [only Black member of the House](#) from South Carolina, a state that is roughly 30 percent Black. The other six are Republicans.

Like a true America First Republican, Massey described himself as a “rabid partisan” and Washington Democrats as “crazy,” but he drew the line at cheating. Massey [said](#) he rued the day when “maybe we become convinced that the only way to preserve the Republic is to implement policies that are contrary to the founding ideas of the Republic.”

A similar sentiment was expressed by the America First Republican state legislators in Indiana who refused to obey Trump’s demand to wipe out Democratic-leaning districts.

In the recent Republican primary there, five of those legislators lost to candidates who openly ran on their willingness to put Trump first.

Spencer Deery, one of two anti-redistricting Republicans to survive the pro-Trump cash tsunami to oust them, [told NBC News](#), “I will never regret listening to constituents and doing the right thing.”

This is not one of those “both sides are doing it” things. Everything California did and [Virginia tried to do](#) in terms of out-of-cycle redistricting was based on statewide votes — not legislative shenanigans. They were only temporary and were initiated in self-defense against Trump’s effort to wipe out Democratic congressional seats in every state possible, starting in Texas.

So let me end where I began: Trump’s midcycle “redistricting” is not politics as usual, but cheating. And the \$1.776 billion slush fund Trump just established to pay “victims” of the Biden administration’s supposed lawfare — which, [as The Washington Post editorial board noted](#), “will pay out for two years before conveniently ceasing to exist right after the 2028 election, ensuring Democrats never get control over the money” — is not business as usual. It is stealing our tax dollars.

Democrats may still turn out enough votes in the midterms to overcome this in-your-face cheating and stealing. But if that doesn’t happen — if it is precisely this dirty dealing that keeps the Democrats from taking the House even if they overwhelmingly win the popular vote nationally — people are not going to take it sitting down. And they shouldn’t.

I worry for the future of the Republic if that happens. You push, you push, you push — and you never know when you’ve crossed the last red line and wiped out the last norm and our whole governing system just starts to fall apart.

That is exactly where Trump and the Trump First Republicans are driving us.