

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/burn-the-republican-party-down-11596149482>

OPINION | DECLARATIONS

Burn the Republican Party Down?

It would damage the country, and those who say yes bear some blame for the president's rise.



By

[Peggy Noonan](#)

July 30, 2020 6:51 pm ET

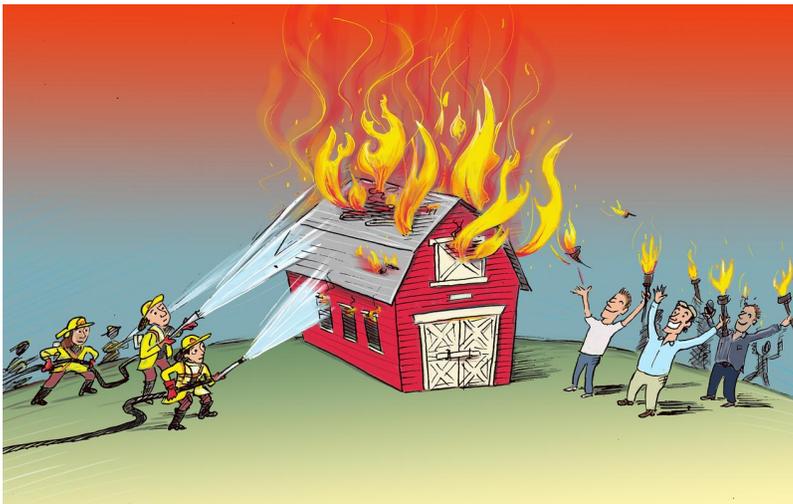


ILLUSTRATION: BARBARA KELLEY

Where did Donald Trump come from? Where is the GOP going? Should the whole thing be burned down? A lot had to go wrong before we got a President Trump. This fact, once broadly acknowledged, has gotten lost, as if a lot of people want it forgotten.

Mr. Trump's election came from two unwon wars, which constituted a historic foreign-policy catastrophe, and the Great Recession, which those in power, distracted by their mighty missions, didn't see coming until it arrived with all its wreckage. He came from the decadeslong refusal of both parties' leadership to respect and respond to Americans'

anxieties, from left and right, about illegal immigration. He came from bad policy and bad stands on crucial issues.

 OPINION: POTOMAC WATCH



Nuke The Filibuster? Delay The Election?



00:00 / 25:01 

SUBSCRIBE

He came from the growing realization of on-the-ground Americans that neither party seemed to feel any particular affiliation with or loyalty to them, that both considered them lumpen bases to be managed and manipulated. He came from the great and increasing social and cultural distance between the movers and talkers of the national GOP, its strategists, operatives, thinkers, pundits and party professionals, and the party's base. He came from algorithms that deliberately excite, divide and addict, and from lawmakers who came to see that all they had to do to endure was talk, not legislate, because legislating involves compromise and, in an era grown polar and primitive, compromise is for quislings.

He came from a spirit of frustration among a sizable segment of the electorate that, in time, became something like a spirit of nihilism. It will be a long time repairing that, and no one is sure how to.

And here, in that perfect storm, was Mr. Trump's simple, momentary genius. He declared for president as a branding exercise and went out and said applause lines, and when the crowd cheered, he decided "This is my program," and when it didn't cheer, he thought, "Huh, that is not my program." Some of it was from his gut, but most of it was that casual. After the election a former high official told me he observed it all from the side of the stage. This week the official said that after a rally, on the plane home, all Mr. Trump and Jared Kushner would talk about was the reaction. "Did you see how they responded to that?"

The base, with its cheers, said they weren't for cutting entitlement benefits. They were still suffering from the effects of 2008, and other things. They weren't for open borders or for more foreign fighting. They were for the guy who said he hated the elites as much as they did.

The past four years have produced a different kind of disaster, one often described in this space. The past six months Mr. Trump came up against his own perfect storm, one he could neither exploit nor talk his way past: a pandemic, an economic contraction that will likely produce a lengthy recession, and prolonged, sometimes violent national street protests. If the polls can be trusted, he is on the verge of losing the presidency.

Now various of his foes, in or formerly of his party, want to burn the whole thing down—level the party, salt the earth where it stood, remove Republican senators, replace them with Democrats.

This strikes me as another form of nihilism. It's bloody-minded and not fully responsible for three reasons.

First, it's true that the two-party system is a mess and a great daily frustration. But in the end, together and in spite of themselves, both parties still function as a force for unity in that when an election comes, whatever your disparate stands, you have to choose whether you align more with Party A or Party B. This encourages coalitions and compromise. It won't work if there are four parties or six; things will splinter, the system buckle. The Democratic Party needs the Republican Party, needs it to restrain its excesses and repair what it does that proves injurious. The Republicans need the Democrats, too, for the same reasons.

Second, if the Republicans lose the presidency, the House and the Senate in November, the rising progressives of the Democratic Party will be emboldened and present a bill for collection. They'll push hard for what they want. This will create a runaway train that will encourage bad policy that will damage the nation. Republicans and conservatives used to worry about that kind of thing.

Third, Donald Trump is burning himself down. Has no one noticed?

When the Trump experience is over, the Republican Party will have to be rebuilt. It will have to begin with tens of millions of voters who previously supported Mr. Trump. It will

have to decide where it stands, its reason for being. It won't be enough to repeat old mantras or formulations from 1970 to 2000. It's 2020. We're a different country.

A lot is going to have to be rethought. Simple human *persuasion* will be key.

Rebuilding doesn't start with fires, purges and lists of those you want ejected from the party.

Many if not most of those calling for burning the whole thing down are labeled "Never Trump," and a lot of them are characterologically quick to point the finger of blame. They're aiming at Trump supporters in Congress. Some of those lawmakers *have* abandoned long-held principles to show obeisance to the president and his supporters. Some, as you know if you watched the supposed grilling of tech titans this week, are just idiots.

But Never Trumpers never seem to judge themselves. Many of them, when they were profiting through past identities as Republicans or conservatives, supported or gave strategic cover to the wars that were such a calamity, and attacked those who dissented. Many showed no respect to those anxious about illegal immigration and privately, sometimes publicly, denounced them as bigots. Never Trumpers eloquently decry the vulgarization of politics and say the presidency is lowered by a man like Mr. Trump, and it is. But they invented Sarah Palin and unrelentingly attacked her critics. They often did it in the name of party loyalty.

Some Never Trumpers helped create the conditions that created President Trump. What would be helpful from them now is not pyromaniac fantasies but constructive modesty, even humility.

The party's national leaders and strategists don't have a lot to be proud of the past few decades. The future of the party will probably bubble up from the states.

But it matters that the past six months Mr. Trump has been very publicly doing himself in, mismanaging his crises—setting himself on fire. As long as that's clear, his supporters won't be able to say, if he loses, that he was a champion of the people who was betrayed by the party elites, the Never Trumpers and the deep state: "He didn't lose, he was the victim of treachery."

Both parties have weaknesses. Liberals enjoy claiming progress that can somehow never quite be quantified. Conservatives like the theme of betrayal.

It will be unhelpful for Republicans, and bad for the country, if that's the background music of the party the next 10 years.

Copyright © 2020 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.