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A Republican Time for Choosing

Will we remain the party of conservative principles or embrace progressivism in the guise of populism?

By **Mike Pence**

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DAVID GOTHARD

The Republican Party faces a momentous choice: Will we remain a party of conservative beliefs, or will we follow the siren song of populism? For more than a century, the ideological rival of conservatism has been a version of liberalism born during the Progressive Era and finding favor in the Democratic Party. It began in the days of Woodrow Wilson and evolved during the administrations of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson as they increased the size and power of the federal government. Their new

programs and entitlements all too often eroded personal liberties and failed to solve the problems they were designed to address.

Where conservatives have historically viewed politics as the art of the possible, progressives see politics as a path to alter society beyond recognition in a quest for material equity, environmental nirvana, or other alleged perfections. Progressives invariably try to destroy whatever stands in their way.

Populism is progressivism in disguise. It strikes at us not from the Democratic Party but from within our own ranks, sparking a battle for the soul of the Republican Party. In the U.S., the conventional story of populism begins in the 19th century, when farmers called for ending the gold standard and printing more money to weaken the dollar and make it easier to pay off debts.

That was bad economics, but the problem with populism goes beyond policy blunders. It would replace our faith in limited government and traditional values with an agenda stitched together by opinion polls, personal grievances and performative outrage. Populists follow urges, not principles. They would erode our commitment to the Constitution and abandon U.S. leadership in the world.

Populism has risen anew in the 21st century due to the failures of big government and public officials who have broken our trust. Globalization, a rising knowledge economy and increasing automation have boosted the incomes of many Americans but left others behind. An epidemic of lethal addiction has affected almost every community. Americans who hold traditional views of faith and family find themselves mocked in the news and entertainment media.

Donald Trump seized on these frustrations in 2016. In his first term as president, he acted as a conservative who sought to minimize the power of centralized government, unleash the economy and restore judicial restraint to the courts. Many of these initiatives were popular, but that didn't make them populist.

Conservatism is rooted in principle. Campaigning for a second term, Mr. Trump became fully uprooted. In 2024 he revealed something about the way he thinks: “You know, people say, ‘You’re conservative.’ I’m not conservative. You know what I am? I’m a man of common sense.” These remarks, in an interview with CNBC, generated headlines because some journalists were surprised by Mr. Trump’s disavowal of conservatism. I wasn’t. I had heard him say much the same many times in the White House. He would state his view on a subject—favoring low taxes or opposing gun control. I would point out that he had just described “the conservative position.” He would wave his hand and correct me with two words: “common sense.”

Conservatism is full of common sense. It applies inherited wisdom and innate judgment to politics. Yet Mr. Trump makes a distinction between conservatism and common sense. In doing so, he reveals that his political commitments are grounded not in conservative principles, but in his instincts, which have often been conservative but increasingly aren’t.

Where Mr. Trump once defended the right to life, he washed his hands of the pro-life cause, claiming that abortion policy is no longer the business of the federal government. Where he once pushed the courts in a conservative direction through smart nominations, he attacked many of the people and groups involved in building one of his most important legacies. Where he once wanted businesses to flourish in a free-market system, he brought about partial federal ownership of several corporations. Where he once wanted to engage with the world and lead, he has increasingly withdrawn from it and sought to isolate the U.S. from its longtime allies. Where he once defended free markets and expanded international trade, he embraced broad-based tariffs, protectionism and price controls on prescription drugs and credit cards. Between the conclusion of his first term and his pursuit of his second, Mr. Trump heard populism’s siren song. He and those around him ran to it.

As Mr. Trump launched his third presidential campaign, he continued to insist that I had the power to overturn the 2020 election as Senate president in 2021. He even advocated setting aside the Constitution. “A Massive Fraud

of this type and magnitude allows for the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution,” he wrote on Truth Social in 2022. We have all learned to treat Mr. Trump’s social-media posts with skepticism, but a conservative would never say such a thing. Here was a clear case of Mr. Trump’s newfound populism merging with progressivism and its hostility to constitutional order.

Since his victory, my concern over his departure from conservatism has grown. Much of the postelection analysis correctly framed it not as a triumph of conservative ideals but as a repudiation of a decadent and debauched Democratic Party. For many right-wing populists, grievance dictates policy. Rather than advance America’s international leadership from a position of strength, populism complains that our allies and trading partners are taking advantage of us and that we need tariffs to settle the score, even at the expense of our national security and economic growth.

Rather than uphold American colonists’ rebellion against monarchical government, populism clamors for centralization to advance its version of the common good. Rather than Edmund Burke’s belief that men have “a right to the fruits of their industry and to the means of making their industry fruitful,” populists insist that we direct the administrative state to settle contract disputes between businesses and unions. Sen. Josh Hawley wants to empower bureaucrats in Washington to seize control of stalled negotiations.

As right-wing populists rise, conservatism risks exchanging its governing philosophy for an identity as a solely oppositional force. This would be a mistake. Defining a movement by its adversaries rather than its principles is a recipe for intellectual decay and political aimlessness. Such a mindset breeds short-term thinking and risks creating a culture of resentment rather than one of renewal.

We are at our best as conservatives when we offer a positive vision, an alternative to left-leaning orthodoxies. But as progressives have captured major institutions and twisted traditional morality, conservatism is often reduced to mere opposition. While this can attract temporary allies and

even win elections when Republicans are out of power, it can't serve as the moral foundation of the conservative movement.

We must say what conservatives believe. American conservatives are champions of freedom—and what we seek to conserve is the freedom inspired by the Declaration of Independence and guaranteed by the Constitution. The political home of those who believe in limited government and individual liberty and who seek to keep faith with our founding documents is the Republican Party.

Calvin Coolidge described the importance of keeping America's founding principles in a speech in Philadelphia to honor the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence:

“If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed, that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions. If anyone wishes to deny their truth and their soundness, the only direction in which he can proceed historically is not forward, but backward toward the time when there was no equality, no rights of the individual, no rule of the people. Those who wish to proceed in that direction cannot lay claim to progress. They are reactionary.”

Popular opinion is fickle. Principles are final. When principles guide us, they can lead us to our greatest political successes. The challenge for conservatives is to hold fast to our principles. This means believing in personal and economic liberty. It means standing up to evil regimes and standing with the friends of freedom on the world stage. It means conducting ourselves with dignity and civility. Above all, it means respecting the Constitution. Leaders fade into history. The politics of convenience driven by the passing moment never prevail, but principles endure.

Mr. Pence served as vice president of the United States (2017-21), and is founder of Advancing American Freedom. This article is adapted from his

book *“What Conservatives Believe: Rediscovering the Conservative Conscience,”* forthcoming on Tuesday.

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