

Politics, Principle and Standing Up to Donald Trump: Moral Courage in the Republican Party

Book Interview

Q: *What motivated your detailed analysis of moral courage in the Republican party?*

A: I'm always fascinated by how people make their moral choices. Why is it that conscience and principle guide some people, even when they know it will cost them a great deal personally? I've written several books on moral choice and was surprised to discover how little choice most people actually experience. For most of us, it turns out that our core identity –especially our sense of ourselves in relation to others – trumps choice. There is less rational calculus and more a spontaneous acting out of our sense of what “people like us” do. It's as if each of us has a moral menu that sets and delineates the range of choice options we find available, not just morally but cognitively. That's how a lot of moral choice works.

So, for example, when I researched *The Heart of Altruism* (Princeton U Press 1996), I found altruists don't even consider walking away from someone who is in need. Why? They just don't consider that an option. It's not on their cognitive menu, in much the same way that getting sushi in an Italian restaurant is pretty near impossible. It's just not on the menu. Similarly, my work with people who rescued Jews during the Holocaust – described in *The Hand of Compassion* – kept insisting they had no choice. These were people making decisions that they knew full well were risking their lives and those of their families. At great risk to themselves, then, they were rescuing people who were often absolute strangers. Yet they all insisted there was no choice to be made “The hand of compassion was faster than the calculus of reason,” one Czech rescuer told me. You just reach out your hand and open your door because these are other human beings who need your help. At some level, it was that simple.

Now, it's impossible to ignore the fact that some really unusual political stuff is going on in our country right now; indeed, this is a strange time throughout the world with populist-autocratic challenges to democracy in many countries with longstanding democratic institutions. In the United States, we have a former president contesting an election, denying its legitimacy despite all the legal court decisions and all the evidence to the

contrary presented to him by officeholders who are often from his own political party and who worked hard to elect him. Yet he persists in his claims, and he has a significant enough group of diehard followers to have serious political clout. Why?

It's always interesting to ask about the people who don't fit the mold. Examining them often reveals a great deal about the general phenomenon we're trying to explain. It can suggest whether our traditional understanding of political life is valid or at least suggest the situations when our traditional explanations work and when they will be limited.

I had just completed a book on moral courage as a general phenomenon. (When Conscience Calls: Moral Courage in Times of Confusion and Despair, University of Chicago Press.) Every year, I mentor a few students through the UCI Ethics Center. In 2022-23, I involved some students in my work on moral courage, trying to show them how I did the research. As we were wrapping up that project, we wondered if moral courage in everyday life differed from moral courage in politics. Like so many Americans, we were watching the GOP turn from a party of conservative principles and limited government to one in which loyalty to Donald Trump seems to be the defining characteristic. That made me wonder what drove the few Republicans who stood up to Trump. What made them different from the rest of the Republican leaders?

Q: Your book delves into the moral courage of certain Republican figures who challenged Trump. Can you elaborate on the key traits or experiences that distinguish these individuals from their colleagues who chose instead to support Trump?

A: In a word: conscience. People who support Trump, even though they express deep concerns in private or have done so at earlier points in time, are fascinating. Why is Lindsey Graham, for example, such a follower now, when he so adamantly criticized Trump initially? On CNN in December 2015, Graham called Trump a “race-baiting, xenophobic, religious bigot....He then went on to tell the reporter, “You know how you make America great again? Tell Donald Trump to go to hell!” What changed? Did Graham simply gather new information about Trump? Is it blind political ambition? Does he so desperately want to influence the actions --be a player – that he moves dramatically from his initial position? Are people willing to do anything to get ahead in politics? Or does Trump “have something” on him? Is Trump blackmailing other politicians? Intimidating them somehow? Are all the Republican politicians that afraid of being challenged in the primaries from the right?

So this train of thought naturally makes you wonder about the people who do NOT fall in line. The people for whom conscience seems to be the driving factor. What makes them different?

Here, we find many different influences. Religion was important for many people. (Flake and Romney both mention their Mormon religion.) Most people talk about their children, asking what they will tell their children in the future when asked what they did to fight against corruption and the autocratic and authoritarian drives evidenced by Trump. They took a long view, and their legacy was important to them. They wanted to be remembered by history as someone who evaluated the facts objectively and followed their oath of office. But essentially, for all the people we analyzed, we found almost a visceral reaction against Trump's excesses. They all said things like, "This is not who we are. Republicans don't separate children from their parents and put them in cages." One woman came up after a talk I gave and told me, "I'm a lifelong Republican and he lost me as 'grab 'em by the pussy.'" That's identity kicking in. They're appalled at Trump's coarsening political discourse. They don't feel Republicans operate that way. This into who Republicans are.

Q: How significant is the role of personal values and upbringing in shaping moral courage? Are there any common threads in the backgrounds of the figures you studied?

A: Core values are extremely important. People who opposed Trump always mentioned how crucial it was to uphold the rule of the law, to protect the idea that everyone is equal before the law. They were appalled that Trump had spread lies about the 2020 election, that he would pressure Republican officeholders to "recertify" the election when the votes were not there to support Trump's claim that he won in 2020. They all referred to the fact that taking an oath of office must count for something. They consider themselves public servants, not servants of Donald Trump or his personal agenda, and they felt their democracy was being threatened by Trump's need for unquestioning loyalty.

Q: What factors do you think influenced changing stances, and how will this impact future credibility and legacies?

A: It's difficult to offer rational explanations for the kind of flip-flops that we have seen. We know that immediately after the mob pierced the Capitol and sent members of the Senate and House scrambling to safety, in fear of their lives, that key Republican leaders denounced Trump. Republican leaders initially held Trump responsible for the attack. McConnell said, "The mob was fed lies. They were provoked by the president and other powerful people." In private, McConnell went further. "The Democrats are going to take care of the son of a bitch for us," McConnell said, referring to the second Trump impeachment shortly after the insurrection. So here we have someone with as much power as Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell initially describing Trump's role in the events of January 6th as clearly impeachable. "If this isn't impeachable, I don't know what is." Kevin McCarthy, the short-lived Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, also began

by condemning Trump for his role in the uprising. According to an audio recording, McCarthy even advocated pushing Trump to resign immediately, saying, “I’ve had it with this guy.” Yet, a surprising number of top Republicans, including both McConnell and McCarthy, again backtracked. They showed no shame or embarrassment in contradicting themselves, first denouncing an act of sedition and later falling in lockstep again with their now-former president. Why? What in the world is going on?

Of course, we all know that politics makes strange bedfellows and that one can get further information that corrects an initial conclusion about someone that may have been made too hastily. But the kind of flip-flops we find with people like McConnell or McCarthy is remarkable. It’s mind-boggling that they can say, in no uncertain terms, that January 6th was an impeachable offense and then change their minds and later defend Trump. How can we make sense of this other than sheer political expediency? It baffles the mind how these politicians have any political credibility at all.

This is not the view of a liberal Democrat. Most of the Republicans I spoke with are also confused. They find Trump does not really care about the conservative agenda and are concerned about the future of their political party. They are embarrassed by Trump’s negative campaigning. They dislike his attack ads, and they despise his name-calling. They are both scared and angry at his threatening people. But the single most important event, the one that changed things forever, was the January 6th storming of the Capitol building. Most traditional Republicans were dismayed and shocked at Trump’s behavior then; it was so far out of the normal that it set a new norm, and they were afraid to see the new normal become accepted

Q: What takeaways do you hope readers gain from this analysis?

A: First, these Rogue Republicans show us that they oppose Trump because he is not a true conservative. They feel he threatens the Republican Party, relegating it to a minor political party in the long run. Second, they do make the case that Trump is not a democrat; they believe his re-election in 2024 would do severe, long-term and possibly irreparable damage to the American democratic way of government. They see this election as a plebiscite on democracy. This is their warning. But they also issue a challenge for the rest of us. They are telling us that keeping democracy depends on finding the strength to speak truth to power. It demands working actively to protect democratic institutions, even when we know in advance that doing so will cost us dearly. They remind us again of the importance of thinking in terms of identity. Who we are as a people will determine the kind of country we will have.

Trump is hardly the usual politician. To understand the opposition to Trump, we must recognize that fact. When we go to the polls in 2024, we must move beyond traditional considerations of policy to ruminate on what lies at both the heart of American conservatism and the core of the American experiment, this great, imperfect gamble on the common man, by which I – unlike the founding fathers – mean to include women, people without property, descendants of slaves, the masses – including Trump’s ancestors, who came fleeing poverty and political oppression, drawn by America’s promise, hoping for the opportunity to forge a better life. All the rest of us, in other words, even those deliberately excluded when Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, and Adams composed their great treatise on freedom, liberty, and equality for all. Imperfect men, they left us with an imperfect polity yet one well worth defending. A democracy, if we can keep it. These rogue Republicans are giving us a warning, and a warning I agree we should all pay great attention to and respond accordingly.