

After Trump's rise, will conservatives be Plato or Diogenes?

By [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#)

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Plato, it is said, confronted Diogenes as the great Cynic philosopher washed his greens for dinner. “If you had humored Dionysius”—the tyrant of Syracuse who had called Plato as an adviser—“you wouldn’t be rinsing greens now.”

Diogenes answered him, “And if you rinsed greens, you wouldn’t have been a slave to Dionysius.”

With Donald Trump becoming the presumptive Republican nominee for president, the party’s leaders have had a choice to make. They can embrace the unpalatable Trump for the sake of the party’s good and their power within it, or they can accept being marginalized in the party and perhaps disempowered in the government for the sake of principle. They can humor the demagogue and maintain the attendant privilege, or they can stand aloof and content themselves with eating greens. Despite numerous, often quite explicit statements that Trump is a dangerous and unacceptable standard-bearer, more and more of them are deciding their appetite for greens is rather limited after all.

Perhaps the most poignant reversal, if not necessarily the most surprising one, came from Florida senator Marco Rubio. Near the end of his ill-starred run for the nomination, Rubio latched onto the #NeverTrump energy in parts of the Republican base with unequalled fervor, using his campaign website to market bumper stickers and shirts bearing the slogan. Rubio was even willing to go beyond safe generalities where Trump’s shortcomings were concerned, insisting Trump is a “con artist” who encourages his supporters to “rough up” anyone they don’t agree with. Trump of course gave better than he got, unforgettably labeling his rival “Little Marco” and calling him a “choke artist.”

Now Rubio has made it clear that he will support Trump and, if asked, speak in his support at the Republican convention in July. Rubio, it turned out, was the Maginot Line of #NeverTrump, menacing and formidable but with a Belgium-sized gap at the end.

More than anything else, the swift collapse of resistance to Trump within the GOP reflects the internal dynamics of partisanship. If you play Plato and pay court to Trump, you stay in good stead with your fellow partisans should he lose, and you stand the chance to wield some influence should he win (which he certainly could). Mitch McConnell gains nothing from a Clinton presidency, and he has every incentive to think happy thoughts about our system's ability to prevent "big mistakes" by, say, unprecedentedly ignorant and erratic presidents.

Trump hasn't made this shift easy, having executed a hostile takeover of the party and humiliated some of its most prominent figures. Their rolling capitulations have, by the by, demonstrated the justice in his ruthless belittling. But within the frame of party politics, these are the sorts of humiliations that serious and ambitious people have to swallow from time to time.

As a result the fall contest is starting to take the shape of a reasonably conventional election polarized along familiar geographic and demographic lines. Republicans will overwhelmingly support their nominee, and Democrats will overwhelmingly support theirs. But win or lose, there is no way for Republican leaders, having supported Trump, to re-establish the many political taboos he has broken. Whatever your reservations and however publicly you've voiced them, once you've decided that you can support someone who has promised to commit war crimes and mass deportations, proposed an unprecedented targeting of a religious group, and peddled conspiracy theories of every sort, it becomes much, much likelier that those positions will take on a greater role in future elections.

Yes, there is more to Trump's appeal than the broken taboos, and the taboos themselves covered over plenty of hypocrisy and criminality. But we will miss them when they're gone. What will it mean to American Muslims when at least 47 percent of their fellow citizens vote for someone who has promised to keep them from re-entering the country? How will the children of undocumented immigrants view a nation that even comes close to endorsing a scheme of mass deportation aimed at their parents? Who will assume, after an ordinarily narrow partisan election, that the worst is past?

This is why the anti-Trump hold-outs among Republican-aligned Christian groups may still matter. The primary campaign almost seemed designed to show that conservative evangelical and Catholic intellectuals can't wag the dog of the GOP electorate. Some, like R.R. Reno of *First Things*, have decided that [washing greens](#)

[isn't their plan, either](#). But if people like Russell Moore of the Southern Baptist Convention refuse to go there—and, not coincidentally, thereby refuse to validate the criticisms leveled against their form of public engagement as a flimsy Christian cover for elitist economics and racial resentment—the politics of 2016 and beyond could look at least slightly different.

Jesus offers his own example, of course. But maybe if you can't be Jesus, you can at least be Diogenes.