



INTERVIEW

Longtime GOP insider Cheri Jacobus: America is "not going to recover from Donald Trump"

Former Republican strategist says her party can't be salvaged — and if Trump isn't punished, America is "done for"

By **CHAUNCEY DEVEGA**

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Former U.S. President Donald Trump gives the keynote address at the Faith & Freedom Coalition during their annual "Road To Majority Policy Conference" at the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center June 17, 2022 in Nashville, Tennessee. (Seth Herald/Getty Images)

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he numerous catastrophes of the Age of Trump could all have been averted, or greatly mitigated. But too many Americans, including at the highest levels of government and society, instead chose to remain silent about the nature of the emergency, or to normalize Trump and the Republican-fascist movement as a slightly exaggerated version of "politics as usual."

Those who did speak out were frequently dismissed and mocked as alarmists by the mainstream media, while also being personally targeted for harassment, abuse and political revenge by Trump and his acolytes. That has been especially true of former Republicans and conservatives who spoke out against Trump, and were then branded as traitors and heretics by his followers and the right-wing rage machine.

Cheri Jacobus can claim to be one of the first Republican "Never Trumpers." A former media spokesperson at the Republican National Committee, she has years of experience as a conservative political strategist, communications expert and commentator. Jacobus is founder and president of the political consulting and PR firm Capitol Strategies PR, and has appeared on CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, CBS, PBS and ABC and other outlets. Her opinion essays have been featured in USA Today, the Guardian, the Hill, the Daily Beast, the Daily News and elsewhere.

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In 2016, **Jacobus unsuccessfully sued Donald Trump** for defamation, claiming that his public attacks on her had resulted in millions of dollars in losses to her professional reputation and other harm. In this conversation, she discusses how the American news media and the rest of the country's political class normalized Trump and boosted his candidacy, in search of ratings, money, access and power. She also explains why so many leading Republicans and right-wing elites ultimately supported Trump even when they knew that he and his followers represented an extreme danger to the country.

Jacobus reflects on questions of accountability and penance for conservatives who betrayed their supposed principles and enabled Trumpism, and argues that many of the Republicans who have testified before the Jan. 6 committee — and are now being celebrated as patriotic heroes — are actually self-interested actors who should not be trusted. At the end of this conversation, Jacobus cautions that the Republican Party cannot be redeemed or rehabilitated and that Democrats and the public must act accordingly if American democracy is to survive.

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Given all that is happening from the Jan. 6 hearings, the escalating assault on democracy by Trump and his allies, and what feels like a never-ending torrent of other troubles, how are you feeling? How do you make sense of it all?

I've been in this fight for seven years. I'm an original "Never Trumper." Donald Trump came after me and got me kicked off Fox News in October of 2015, because I publicly confirmed a Washington Post report that he had a super PAC. Ever since then, I became a target. Of course this was mainly Fox News, but also CNN. There are a lot of guilty parties.

This was very distressing to me, as someone who's been a part of the American news media for many decades. You know, I have a healthy cynicism about politics and political media. You know they're in it for the ratings. You know people aren't going to be perfect. But you still expect some basic level of decency and ethics. I was shaken to my core real early on with how the news media normalized and amplified Donald Trump.

All these years later, to see it's still going on — that is immensely disappointing. Donald Trump and these right-wing extremist Republicans and the bad guys more generally are winning, and have already won bigger than I ever could have feared.

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What are your feelings about the House Jan. 6 hearings?

The hearings have been blockbusters. They exposed the breadth and depth of the effort to overturn an election, overtake our government by force and impose a type of government never seen or experienced in America. It should not have taken a year and half for us to get this information. We came close to losing our democracy and we are still in peril. But the hearing witnesses were credible, had a wealth of valuable information and were almost exclusively Republicans, so it's impossible to blame it all on the Democrats.

What about the Republicans who testified and the media narrative that presents them as heroes? I see few if any heroes there. They were coerced, or otherwise testified out of self-interest — including Cassidy Hutchinson. They have almost to a person said they were proud of having worked with the Trump regime and would vote for him and other Republicans in the future.

The witnesses are not heroes. They were under oath and had no choice. If they were heroes, they would have come forward 12 to 18 months ago. Cassidy Hutchinson even tried to go work for Trump at Mar-a-Lago after Jan. 6. If the coup had succeeded and Trump had forced his way back into office, these people would all still be with him. They were saving themselves with their testimony.

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Do you still believe that Trump and his confederates will never be properly punished for their obvious crimes? We have this narrative that "the walls are closing in"

everywhere. I remain very suspicious of that, and will not be satisfied until Trump is in prison for a long time.

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Merrick Garland allowed Trump to keep those documents at Mar-a-Lago for a year and a half. He did not initiate the FBI raid — he merely gave his OK. He has harmed our democracy by not acting on the Jan. 6-related Trump crimes, the obstruction outlined in the Mueller report and other Trump crimes. I do believe that public pressure and the excellent work of the Jan. 6 committee is effectively pushing him into action, even though it's tardy. As well, Trump forced his hand by ignoring a subpoena to return the stolen documents, and now we know they were highly sensitive documents about nuclear weapons. It's almost as if Trump wanted this drama and showdown.

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How do you explain the level of denial from people in the mainstream media, the political class and other professional smart people about Trump and his fascist movement? They are stuck on this hamster wheel of supposed shock and surprise. To me, it's sickening to watch.

Everybody in the American political establishment and those circles in Washington knew what Trump was. That includes the Republicans and the media. They just didn't think he was going to win. They thought they were going to have their fun. I left the Republican Party the day after they nominated Trump. People kept asking me, "Why are you doing that? He's going to lose. We're all going to pull back together."

I didn't want to sit at that table. I couldn't imagine being in strategy meetings with people who had ever been fine or accepting of Trump. When he won, I was already well along in my decision to leave the Republican Party. I didn't need to wait to be convinced. I already knew how bad it was.

I try to call out corruption on both sides of the aisle. There are Never Trumpers who I believe are frauds. Maybe they started out doing the right thing but along the way turned it into a grift. I welcome everybody. That includes people who worked for Trump and changed their minds. Or maybe they just, for the sake of history, wanted to end up on the right side.

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I also don't trust the people who have always been very successful in politics and media, and who flip-flopped back and forth and claimed that they didn't know how bad Trump really was. They knew how bad he was. They were just trying to get something out of Trump. When it didn't work out, they backed off.

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The professional centrist types and the Beltway careerists are some of the worst offenders in terms of being in perpetual denial about Trumpism and what that man and his movement did to the country. They truly believe that a return to "normal" is possible.

They're not in denial. They all know, and have always known, what Trump is. They put their finger in the air to see which way the wind is blowing. You would not believe all the messages I have from people who work professionally in politics and media who never thought he could win and who opposed him. But then those same people turned around and got in line. They wanted to keep their TV contracts and their lobbying gigs. They wanted to keep their place as a cog in the wheel. Where else were they going to go? They saw what happened to me. The professional politics and media types don't want to take the risk of being retaliated against and punished.

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What do you say to those in the media and political classes, or among the public, who argue that the best way to defeat Trump and his fascist movement is to ignore him — that taking away the attention will weaken him?


You can't ignore Donald Trump. He is too dangerous. One of the main problems now is that Trump has successfully said to his followers, "Only pay attention to Fox or Breitbart or Newsmax. Everybody else is fake news. They're all lying to you." Once you put those tens of millions of people in an information vacuum with their blinders on, we are in very dangerous territory as a society.

The Trumpists and Republicans and others who follow him don't care about democracy and a good society. It is tribalism. All they care about is their side winning. They like the white supremacy. They like the misogyny. They like the fighting and chaos. They like the idea of beating up on people they view as being below them or too different from them.

His followers also like the feeling of belonging, the feeling that they are part of something bigger than themselves. It makes them feel smart and strong. In their minds, being MAGA and in TrumpWorld gives them a sense of importance and an identity they may have never felt before in their entire lives.

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There are other people, however, who, if they had accurate information about reality, the news and politics more generally, might change their minds about Trump. Those people are in information silos. The Republicans and other members of the right know that once you put people in these information silos, blocking them off from accurate information, you control them. You control what they know. They think they're informed because they spend a lot of time in these spaces consuming information. Some of these persuadable voters can be pulled away from the Republican Party and Trump. Close elections are won or lost on these margins.

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As someone who was a Republican insider, how do you explain this version of the Republican Party? How did it come into existence?

When I first started out in politics, I was working for **Bob Michel**. He was House Republican leader at the time. There was this weird right-wing fringe element here and there in the party and conservative movement, but they were nowhere near as prevalent as they would become years later.

When the Republicans took over Congress in the mid '90s, these fringe elements got more power. They were part of a coalition, and they were going to get something as part of that bargain with the Republican leadership. That fringe became stronger until it was able to bully and drown out the more reasonable voices in the Republican Party and conservative

movement. The extremists are not interested in compromise with the Democrats to advance legislation that would be in everyone's interest. They just want to win at any cost.

Did Trump transform the Republican Party, or did he just give them permission to be their true selves?

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Trump boiled the frog slowly. There are Republicans who say and believe things and tolerate behavior now because of Trump that they would not have 10 years ago. More generally, Trump and his allies were able to move Republican voters to become more extreme. What they did is really a type of brainwashing, for lack of a better word.

The news media is also to blame for this discord and extremism. When I started out in politics, 80% of Americans were more or less in the center or slightly to the left or right of it. But the news media got to a point where they only wanted to highlight the conflict between the extremes on either side. They want drama. They want fights.

I used to be on TV all the time. But what happened is that Fox would want me to come on only if I stuck to certain talking points and had a far right-wing perspective on a given topic. Fox usually wanted catfights. They actually used that language. Fox wanted that drama. And if I was not sufficiently right-wing or if I wasn't going to say the thing that would cause fireworks and draw eyeballs and create drama and controversy, they weren't interested.

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A reasonable moderate that actually knows her stuff, especially if she's a woman, was not something Fox wanted. So they started dumbing down the entire political debate. The cable networks more generally do that now. The result is that the public is done a disservice and are not in a position to really learn what is going on in politics and the world from the 24/7 news cycle.

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What about your Republican colleagues who made the bargain with Trumpism? What was their calculus? Was it just power and money? Was it ideology? Something else? You know many of these people personally.

Some of them reasoned that Trump was going to be nominated, so let's back him. Others didn't jump on board with Trump until he won. Others backed Trump because they wanted to fit in and still be able to go to their monthly Republican Women's Club meeting. Those higher up in the food chain wanted to keep their lobbying and TV jobs.

What does Donald Trump represent to you?

He's absolutely a corrupt crook. I wouldn't be surprised if we find out that he is owned by Russia and Putin. Trump is an unbelievably evil human being. I believe that he is one of the most evil people that we've ever seen in American public life. He brings out the worst in people. Once Trump is emboldened a little bit, he doesn't stop, he keeps going. The biggest mistake Democrats made was not impeaching Trump for obstruction of justice as proven in the Mueller report.

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Once he knew they were going to back down, he felt he could do whatever he wanted, and he has. The world is paying a price. And then to see all the people who follow him and deny what

he is, or think it doesn't matter. It's disheartening. And I do not believe that the United States is going to recover from Donald Trump and what he did in my lifetime.

We defeated him. Democrats were given the majority. One of the main reasons the Democrats were put in power is because the American people wanted accountability and justice. We don't have it yet. If Donald Trump is not punished for his crimes, then this country is done for.

It should be easy to attack and defeat Trump and the Republicans, based on the literal harm and death their policies have caused and continue to cause. Their actual policies are unpopular across the board. Yet the Republicans have, for the most part, gained the momentum. What advice would you give the Democrats about messaging and strategy?

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Everything has to be about the Jan. 6 hearings — getting that information out to the American people and keeping it front and center. This has to be done on the local level and through other means, not just through national news media.

Communicate clearly to the American people and those Fox viewers and Republicans and others who back Trump that are persuadable. Tell them that what Trump did on Jan. 6 is treason. Don't be hyperbolic. Focus on the facts and information. Convince those people who

can be convinced. Don't fight with people who you're never going to convince. Tell these Republican persuadables, "This is no longer the party that you were once a part of."

Don't shame people because they've been Republicans for 40 years. Convince them that the party they're with now is not what they think it is, it's not what they remember. I guarantee you that many of these people are in that information silo and do not understand how much the Republican Party has changed for the worse.

In addition, some of the best spokespeople in the Democrat Party are not visible enough. For example, Sheldon Whitehouse, Amy Klobuchar and Elizabeth Warren. Those are the people who should be on the news all the time on Sundays, and even on the opinion shows. Republicans are using every tool in their toolbox and then some. Democrats are not — and they're the majority party in Congress.

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What about accountability for the Republicans who helped to build this monster? There's a whole class of consultants, advisers, elected officials, media commentators and activists who helped to birth American neofascism. They should not be allowed to wash their hands of it all just by announcing they no longer support Donald Trump.

There are different levels here. Everybody didn't help to build this monster in the same way. Yes, there are political consultants and/or advertising experts who did such a thing. There are

sincere Never Trumpers like me who can help the Democrats. There are some things I regret — but to want me to do penance because I was a Republican? You are not going to win over these persuadable Republican voters and win elections if the approach is to make them feel guilty.

That kind of message is not going to work for people who are still Republicans but could be won over if they had different sources of news and other information outside the right-wing echo chamber. In the end, there were some people who were more responsible for getting us to this point with Trump and this democracy crisis. One of my errors was actually believing that the Republican Party was a "big tent." Now I realize that was absolutely not true. Hindsight is 20/20. When should I have known that the Republican Party wasn't really a big tent? I am still grappling with that.

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So many centrist types and others, especially in the media class, have this standard line where they say that Republican elected officials and party elites, the news media personalities, the strategists and the like don't actually believe what they are saying. In other words, these talking points about "critical race theory" or "grooming" or the "great replacement" are so ridiculous they don't really believe it. My response is: Who cares? They are saying those things because it works to win elections and gain power. And the people who make excuses for them are just protecting their peer group.

It doesn't matter if the Republican elites believe what they are saying, because they are getting their public to believe it. I don't care what Tucker Carlson believes. I care that Tucker Carlson has a huge platform, and he's saying things that are getting people killed. I don't care if he believes it or not. He's doing it. Is the problem with Rupert Murdoch, for giving him a platform?

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It doesn't matter if they believe it. They're doing it. They have no conscience. They're doing it because they know how to fool the rubes. They know how to get people to be OK with it. And I hate to say it, but: American voters — are they stupid? Some of them are, yes. We've seen the stupid people at the Trump rallies. There are others who think they're informed because they've been told not to watch other media except Fox. They've been told that everybody else is lying to them. They think if they get the newsletters from Judicial Watch or Heritage Foundation, and they watch Fox and go to political gatherings that they are being informed. Again, they are not.

Can this Republican Party be rehabilitated or otherwise saved after Donald Trump?

I left the party the day after they nominated Trump. I'd been an RNC spokesperson. I've worked on Capitol Hill. For years, I had been a lobbyist. I was a TV pundit. All of it. I left the party, because I knew that it was over. Is the Republican Party salvageable? No. I didn't think it was salvageable even if Trump had lost in 2016.

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My fear is that the Democrats are still pretending that the Republican Party can be saved. They are pretending this is true because they are afraid to directly take on the Republican Party and the horrible things it now represents and has done. The Democrats in Congress are afraid that if they push for indictments for the Republicans who aided and abetted Trump and his coup, there will be retaliation when and if the Republicans take back control of the House and Senate. That's the driving force now behind a lot of the reticence on the part of Democrats: fear.

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By **CHAUNCEY DEVEGA**

Chauncey DeVega is a senior politics writer for Salon. His essays can also be found at [Chaunceydevega.com](https://chaunceydevega.com). He also hosts a weekly podcast, [The Chauncey DeVega Show](#). Chauncey can be followed on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

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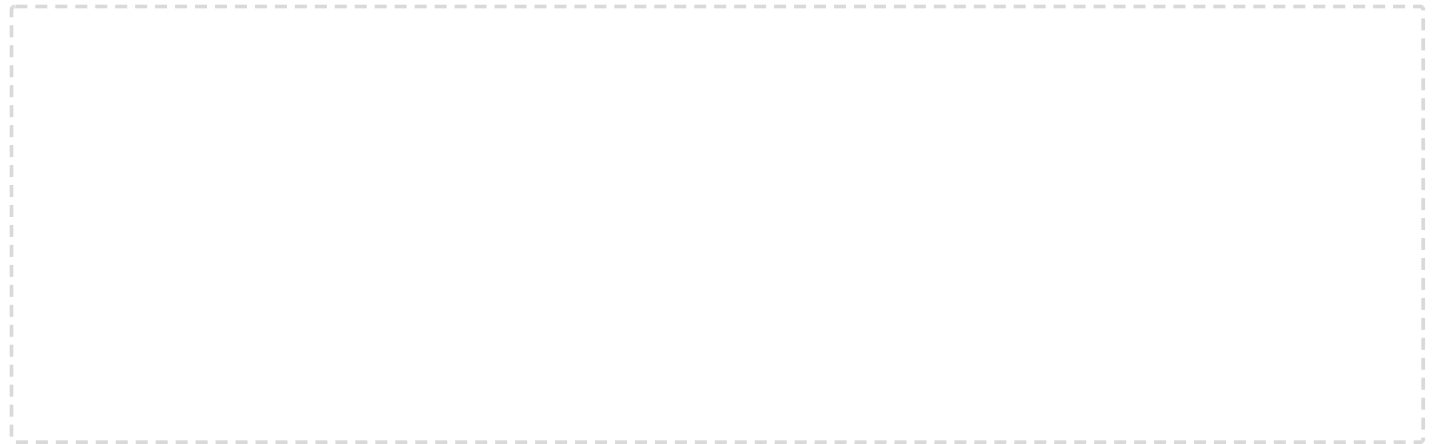
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