

## THE GOP IS TRUMP'S PARTY NOW

The remarkable transformation of the Republican Party, begun with Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, reached a historical milestone last week in Helsinki with the president's warm embrace of Vladimir Putin.

For three-quarters of a century, the Republican Party has been the bulwark of skepticism about Russia. Three Republican presidents in a row refused to extend diplomatic recognition to the young Soviet Union in the 1920s, and when the United States, under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a Democrat, became the last major power to recognize the Soviet Union, he did so against the opposition of many Republicans.

Now, with Trump's effusive description of his meeting with the Russian leader, the GOP has completed the transformation that the Manhattan billionaire began during his 2016 presidential campaign.

The most prominent signal of the transformation of the Republican Party: The denunciation of Trump's remarks in Finland -- since recanted, though the president's views toward Russia seem unchanged -- by the last two GOP presidential nominees, Sen. John McCain of Arizona (2008) and former Gov. Mitt Romney of Massachusetts (2012), currently a Republican candidate for the Senate from Utah.

Trump has approval ratings among Republicans that are surpassed only by George W. Bush's in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks. Some Republicans, including House Speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, were astonished by Trump's comments, but Ryan is retiring and is regarded as a symbol of the Republican past. The other GOP lawmakers who questioned the president's conduct are longtime critics of Trump, though some, such as Sens. Patrick J. Toomey of Pennsylvania and John Cornyn of Texas, continue to blame Russia for intrusion into the 2016 election. Most other Republicans express at least grudging support of Trump.

Though Trump walked back some of his remarks, his broader comments still were a dramatic departure from Republican orthodoxy. For two generations it was generally the Democrats, not the Republicans, who argued that the United States should reach out to the Russians for trade and national-security reasons.

"If Barack Obama had given Monday's press conference, he would be up for impeachment. The current president has changed the landscape in a dramatic way," said Harley Balzer, an emeritus professor of Russian history at Georgetown University and former director of Georgetown's Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies.

While anti-communism was a posture adopted by most mainstream American politicians, the principal Republican figures of the post-World War II era were the leading skeptics of Moscow.

The Republicans even inserted criticism of FDR's agreements at Yalta into their 1952 convention platform. (The GOP said the series of Allied summits with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin "traded our overwhelming victory for a new enemy and for new oppressions and new wars which were quick to come.") Then, 13 years ago, George W. Bush said Yalta had led to what he characterized as "one of the greatest wrongs of history."

Richard Nixon won his prominence in American politics with his opposition to Soviet Communism, his campaign against prominent Americans accused of having Soviet sympathies or being Soviet agents, and his vilification of Democrats, including his opponent in a storied 1950 California Senate race, Democratic Rep. Helen Gahagan Douglas, whom he derided as being "pink right down to her underwear." That was why his trip to the Soviet Union in 1972 was so remarkable.

Though a critic of what he called America's "military-industrial complex" and, as a top military figure in World War II, a witness to Soviet cooperation with the Allies in the drive to defeat Nazi Germany, Dwight Eisenhower harbored no illusions about the Soviet Union. He approved U-2 aerial reconnaissance missions over the USSR that became an embarrassment when one of the aircraft, piloted by CIA operative Francis Gary Powers, was shot down in 1960.

Despite his outreach to Mikhail Gorbachev, Ronald Reagan was a classic Cold Warrior of the old school. He regarded the Soviet Union as "the evil empire," was caught on a live microphone joking that he was about to bomb Russia, and ascribed many of the problems around the globe to Soviet intervention and involvement.

Until the ascendancy of Trump, the post-Nixon Republican Party was remade in the image of Reagan, who shared with Trump a devotion to low taxes and skepticism of big government. But he often worked with Democrats, some of whom were his allies in his tax and budget cuts of 1981 and were ardent partners in the tax overhaul of 1986. He had an intuitive generosity and sunny optimism that are at odds with the Trump style.

But with support of working-class voters who traditionally have sided with the Democrats, Trump has transformed the character of the GOP, which historically has been regarded as the foe of blue-collar Americans.

Reagan now is regarded as a figure of a distant past; he left office three decades ago and has little relevance to the new generation of Republicans. Nixon, whose Watergate involvement spawned an impeachment attempt that some of Trump's opponents would like to reprise, is remembered by even fewer voters; the median-age American was born seven years after Nixon resigned the presidency in disgrace.

WOf all his actions, the changes Trump has set in motion may be the most enduring. A future president may mend fences with Canada, the European Union and NATO, but by altering the character of the Republican Party, Trump may have altered American politics permanently.