

Opinion | Mary Ellen Klas, Columnist

Voters Must Finish What Nikki Haley Started

The former Trump administration official waited too long and left too much unsaid in giving Americans a reason to reject the former president.

March 6, 2024 at 10:19 AM EST

By **Mary Ellen Klas**

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It's up to voters now. *Photographer: Brandon Bell/Getty Images North America*

Nikki Haley announced the suspension of her campaign today. She lasted longer than everyone expected but the outcome was inevitable.

She didn't endorse former President Donald Trump. That's good. But she didn't give him the verbal takedown he deserves either. She didn't say that he's a self-absorbed narcissist who will dismantle the US justice system and turn the nation into an authoritarian state.

Her unwillingness – and that of anyone in the GOP – to stand up and deliver this message is how the party got into this mess in the first place.

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Haley is the first woman to win a Republican primary and the last candidate willing to challenge Trump before he secures the party's nomination. His takeover of the franchise that calls itself the Grand Ol' Party is now complete.

Trump emerged from the Super Tuesday contests just 158 delegates short of what he needs to clinch the nomination. That will happen next week. The July convention will be the coronation he has dreamed about since he was a small child. The party establishment will continue to line up behind him, some of them still under the delusion that they can provide the guardrails needed to preserve democracy.

But the former United Nations ambassador and South Carolina governor has one more job. To return to the White House, Trump needs Haley's voters. Because Trump believes in nothing but winning and views everything as a transaction, Haley should withhold her endorsement unless he's willing to give her voters what they are asking for.

Imagine if Haley said she'd encourage her supporters to vote for Trump if he retreated from his dangerous policy positions. That list includes his opposition to support for Ukraine, his threat to let Putin attack NATO allies, and his dehumanizing refusal to embrace a border deal.

"It is now up to Donald Trump to earn the votes of those in our party and beyond it who did not support him," she said in a brief speech directed to Trump on Wednesday. She wished him well but added, "This is now his time for choosing."

It won't happen. Trump is too arrogant. Still, it's a fun thought exercise to imagine America's self-described "foremost dealmaker" held hostage by a political rival – and a

woman.

Haley repeatedly told voters that the former president can't win in November. If she's right, she will be the one to say "I told you so" and be perfectly positioned to lead the bitterly divided party into an internal examination. But that won't happen either.

Exit polls Tuesday reinforced what we already know: MAGA is not the majority of the Republican Party. But Trump has the party in a headlock, having recently installed his daughter-in-law as its chair and changed the rules to benefit himself. The only hope is that voters deliver a dismantling blow to the top of the ticket on down in November, forcing those left to resurrect it from the ash heap.

But if Haley is wrong and Trump wins, she'll not only be exiled from the party, she'll be known as the Republican who was best positioned to stop the dangerous march of Trump's nativist, law-defying, Constitution-ignoring MAGA movement during the most consequential election in recent American history, and squandered it.

Haley outlasted a crowded field of male rivals and won the support of thousands of voters who said they will not vote for Trump in November, or only vote for him as a last-ditch option. She ran on a platform a platform that promoted a return to traditional conservative values and a forward-looking message of generational change. Her pragmatic brand of conservatism and ability to appeal to billionaire donors gave her staying power. Her foreign policy experience and positive vision gave her cross-generational appeal.

But while Haley demonstrated skill and tenacity, she lacked courage.

She failed to widen her reach by giving voters the strongest reasons to defeat Trump - his dismantling of our Constitution and march toward dictatorship. She made vague references to Trump being "consumed by the past, by investigations, by vendettas, by grievances" but avoided pointed references to his four indictments, his two impeachment trials, and the millions he owes in damages for sexual abuse.

Haley talked about how Trump was unfit to serve another term, but never talked about how 17 of his cabinet members resigned and won't support him in November. She warned that the former president favors Russian President Vladimir Putin over US allies, but didn't explain that Trump's strongman message is a predecessor to authoritarian rule.

Americans have forgotten what they don't like about Trump, and Haley could have forced them to remember. She never spoke about his inept management of the pandemic, his fake "miracle cures" or that he was found to be the single biggest driver of Covid misinformation.

It took Haley until Sunday, just days before Super Tuesday and her last-shot to gain momentum, for her to finally condemn Trump's efforts to block the peaceful transfer of power on Jan. 6. "He had the opportunity to stop it...And he was silent," she told ABC's *Meet the Press*.

She suggested that the Republican National Committee could become his "legal slush fund." She did what she should have done months sooner and raised questions about whether he would follow the Constitution if elected president again. And she appeared to back off her pledge to support him if he wins the nomination.

It was all too late. So much had been left unsaid for too long.

Americans, having been manipulated by a right-wing media ecosystem into believing conspiracy theories, half-truths and lies for eight years, are exhausted. They no longer trust any of the institutions designed to protect them from zealots like Trump. They have found refuge in his divisive tactics and false hope in his simple mind.

Republicans who can persuade their peers to believe in the rule of law. Haley was an important surrogate for the solid third of the Republican Party base that is prepared to reject the former president. She exceeded expectations but she failed. Let's hope American voters finish the job.

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