

Opinion | Mary Ellen Klas, Columnist

Georgia's Kemp Defied Trump in 2020. Will He Do It Again?

The governor has criticized Trump's electability, defended the state against election lies, and "lived to tell the tale."

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By Mary Ellen Klas

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A GOP role model? *Photographer: Photographer: Elijah Nouvelage/Bloomberg*

More than a half-century ago, stunt daredevil Karl Wallenda balanced on a 1,200-foot tightrope suspended above the rocky waterfalls of the northeast Georgia mountains and successfully crossed the Tallulah Gorge. The state hasn't seen a high wire act as daunting since, but Republican Governor Brian Kemp may be getting close.

The governor has spent nearly four years walking a tightrope since former President Donald Trump and his army of election-denying supporters labeled Kemp a “turncoat” and “coward” for refusing to meddle in Georgia’s 2020 election results. Although Georgia has a vigorous MAGA base, Kemp keeps taking shots at the former president—raising doubts about his electability and obsession with perpetuating election lies— and has not only managed to avoid injury, but he has kept the Trump-endorsed MAGA forces from taking over state government.

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As Reagan conservatives fight to regain a foothold in Trump’s Republican Party, Kemp’s approach may be a model worth replicating. MAGA extremism isn’t going to stop by defeating Trump. It’s going to happen by persuading soft Trump supporters— the principled conservatives who still believe in the rule of law and the US Constitution— that there is a wiser, more stable path forward.

That approach requires leadership and political skill. Kemp has demonstrated both, but he also has to make a choice. Will he give permission to the faction of Republicans still capable of listening and persuade them that another Trump presidency poses a fundamental risk to the nation? Or will he join the bandwagon of politically ambitious politicians too afraid to lead their sheep away from the cliff?

For starters, Kemp needs to stop undercutting his own argument. A month ago, as the oxygen was draining from former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley’s long-shot campaign, Kemp gave her campaign a nod, suggesting that she should remain in the race because “voters want to have their say.”

But he also gave a nod to Trump. He didn’t endorse the former president, but he promised to be a loyal Republican and back him if he becomes the eventual GOP nominee because, “he would still be a lot better than Biden.”

It's the sort of equivocation that most Americans are used to hearing from politicians, but the stakes are too high this time around. Kemp should back down from his endorsement promise, and do what Haley did Sunday when she suggested that she no longer feels bound by the Republican National Committee pledge to support the party's eventual nominee.

Kemp, 60, may seem like an unlikely proxy for the no-more MAGA movement. But the conservative Southerner, who formerly served as secretary of state, deftly sidestepped a Trump takedown and is widely seen as rising star in the GOP and potential presidential contender in 2028.

After Trump narrowly lost Georgia in 2020 and the state became the fulcrum of his false claim that the election was stolen, Kemp not only defended his state's results and procedures, he pointedly declared that Trump was wrong and that Joe Biden was the legitimate winner.

By 2022, Trump was in retaliation mode. He recruited David Perdue, a former Georgia governor and US senator, to run what would become an embarrassingly unsuccessful attempt to unseat Kemp in the Republican primary. Kemp not only crushed Perdue by a 52-point margin and handily-defeated Democrat Stacey Abrams, his allies shellacked a lineup of Trump recruited-and-backed candidates for attorney general, insurance commissioner, lieutenant governor and secretary of state.

Kemp won a mandate by not taking the bait when Trump personally attacked him in campaign ads and by appeasing his base with conservative policies, such as a six-week abortion ban, a sweeping election law designed to address Trump-fueled doubts about election integrity, and sending state troopers to the Texas border.

In June, Kemp chastised Trump for congratulating "a murderous dictator," referring to North Korea's Kim Jong Un after the Communist nation's admission to the World Health Organization's executive board. And when Kemp was recently asked by ABC News if Trump should be granted legal immunity for his actions while he was in the White House, he replied: "My personal opinion is, no one is above the law."

Even as Trump's nomination became increasingly inevitable this year, Kemp broadened his criticism to include the president's MAGA enablers.

“We have leaders unwilling to stand up to the fringe elements of their own parties or because they’re scared of getting called out on prime-time Fox News or MSNBC,” Kemp said at a February speech at Washington and Lee University. “Well, I’ll tell you, I’ve been there, folks, and I’ve lived to tell the tale. Because at the end of the day, this election is not about any one person, politician or political issue.”

As Haley’s performance has shown, there is a faction of Republicans who consistently vote against Trump. Polls show that these Republicans still believe in the justice system and want to see special counsel Jack Smith’s charges play out in a jury trial. They say that a guilty verdict would be a legitimate reason to reject Trump.

Georgia will again be a crucial swing state in November’s presidential election and, while it’s unlikely Kemp can tamp down the MAGA movement and bring his party back home by then, let’s hope he keeps trying. It’s a high wire act that requires not only sure-footed deftness, but very thick skin.

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