

The martyr who may rise again: Christian right's faith in Trump not shaken

The talk in the carpeted corridors of the Road to Majority conference suggests the ex-president's big lie has firmly taken root



Interviews found a widespread conviction that the 2020 election was stolen, support for tougher voting restrictions and a reluctance to condemn Trump supporters who stormed the US Capitol.

David Smith *in Orlando*

Sat 19 Jun 2021

Young alligators swam in the water or lazed on artificial rocks as a waterfall cascaded nearby. "Alligators are found primarily in freshwater and swamps and marches," noted a nearby sign. "... Alligators are opportunistic feeders."

The "Gator Springs" exhibit greeted religious conservatives this week as they made their way through the vast atrium of the Gaylord Palms Resort & Convention Center in Orlando, Florida, to regroup after Republicans' loss of power in 2020 and test early contenders for the presidential nomination in 2024.

After riding up an escalator, attendees at the Faith & Freedom Coalition's annual Road to Majority conference met with a registration sign slapped with two additional labels: "Trump: Take America Back, 2024" and "Trump Store, Vendor Exhibits".

Beside it was a T-shirt that said: "Jesus is my savior. Trump is my president."

This, along with a plethora of “Make America great again” (Maga) hats, made clear that the Christian right’s unlikely faith in Trump has not been shaken. For many he is a martyr who may yet rise again.

The vendor display turned out to be quite modest at what, despite liberation from face masks and physical distancing, was a relatively low energy event. Interviews with a dozen attendees found a widespread conviction that the 2020 election was stolen, support for tougher voting restrictions and a reluctance to condemn Trump supporters who stormed the US Capitol on 6 January.

And the choice of Florida as the venue was no coincidence: its governor, Ron DeSantis, is seen as Trump’s heir apparent. Jonathan Riches, 42, from Tampa, wearing a red “Maga” hat and “I ♥ Ron DeSantis” t-shirt, said: “I’ve fallen in love with DeSantis as much as I love Trump. I’d be OK with Trump handing on the torch to DeSantis.”

Riches – a rightwing activist with a reputation for litigiousness and spreading falsehoods – booed Mike Pence during his speech on Friday because of the former vice president’s refusal to overturn the election result; others in the room shouted “Traitor!” and were escorted out.

“We feel like he abandoned Trump,” Riches explained. “We needed him to challenge the election. He doesn’t represent our party. He’s now trying to redeem himself but we don’t want him.”

Attorney general William Barr and state election officials reported no significant irregularities in the vote and judges threw out dozens of challenges. Yet Trump and his allies have continued to nurture “the big lie” about a stolen election, denying Joe Biden legitimacy.

The talk in the airy, carpeted corridors of the Road to Majority conference suggests that it has firmly taken root. Several attendees cited the increased use of mail-in ballots due to the coronavirus pandemic as ripe for voter fraud, even though some states have used mail-in voting for years. They also endorsed so-called “audits” taking place in Arizona and elsewhere.

Shelley Villarreal, 56, a retired teacher from Houston, Texas, cited the work of Sidney Powell, a discredited lawyer who was ridiculed for threatening to “release the Kraken”. She said: “Sidney Powell has some pretty good statistics and data and facts. I rely on her to know.”

As for the insurrection, Villarreal, wearing a red “Trump 2020” hat and red “President Trump 2024” sweater, said: “Violence has no place in politics. However, I did think it was an emotionally charged crowd and it just got out of control. I don’t think that was the plan; it happened in the heat of the moment. It was a reflection of how frustrated the public was about the outcome of the election.”

TV cameras captured Trump supporters violently attacking police, smashing windows, stealing property, carrying the Confederate flag and calling for Pence to be hanged. Five people lost their lives and Trump was impeached for a second time.

But Republicans and rightwing media have recently pushed a false flag conspiracy theory that the FBI orchestrated the attack. Glenn Romano, 50, an electrical engineer from Greensboro, North Carolina, said without any factual basis: “I think it was staged. There have been reports of BLM [Black Lives Matter] leaders. Our media’s just completely anti-conservative. They’re pushing the leftist agenda.”

A stock trader from Tampa, who gave his name only as Greg A, openly endorsed the insurrection and compared it to the American Revolution. “1776 was the same thing because your government says we are going to install a dictatorship,” the 27-year-old said. “The people have no choice but to rise up.”

He also made an evidence-free assertion about Democrats: “They cheated to get into office. The election was rigged. Their mission is to turn America into a communist shithole.”

Others shared the dismay at what they saw as Biden’s willingness to embrace a progressive agenda, including a big expansion of government. Michael Altman, 63, from Cape Coral, Florida, said: “I think the Biden administration is a disaster. He’s gone too far to the left. He wants to detail our economy by raising taxes. I thought Biden was going to be more moderate.”

Altman, who is retired from working in financial services, added: “There were some problems with the election. Whether it was enough to swing the result, I don’t know. But they need to look into voter fraud. It was worse than it has been in the past. It could backfire against the Democrats one day.”

Trump, who turned 75 this week and resumes campaign rallies next Saturday in Ohio, has hinted that he might run for president again in 2024. Many who attended the Road to Majority conference pledged to support him if he does, although few wanted Pence to be his running mate again.

Altman said: “If Trump runs, he will be the nominee hands down. I’d like him to; he gets a bad rap from the press. He has a habit of saying things but his policies were great. He got the vaccines out pretty quick. He is pretty sharp but he gets himself into trouble.”

But Kat Kerr, 70, a business owner wearing a Stars and Stripes stole and a “I don’t do demons” badge, insists that the 45th president never lost.

“Trump is our president right now,” she said. “Eighty million Americans know that. You can’t steal a free country.”

Republicans in Washington have proved unwilling to denounce Trump’s stolen election claim and voted against a bipartisan commission to investigate the 6 January attack. They appear eager to change the subject and concentrate their fire on what they call Biden’s crises.

Members of Congress who addressed the conference on Friday duly gave the 2020 election a wide berth. One exception was Lindsey Graham, a senator from South Carolina, who said Trump lost by only 44,000 votes in the electoral college: “44,000

votes short and we can argue about being cheated and there was a lot of shenanigans, right?”

The speakers, including several potential 2024 candidates, highlighted the urgency of winning back the House of Representatives next year but avoided saying that Trump should run two years later. Graham chose his words carefully when he said: “If we can pull this off, take back the House and Senate, then 2024 becomes ours to lose. Imagine four more years of Donald Trump policies.”

Many preferred to focus on “culture war” issues that currently animate the Republican party and Fox News. Abortion, “cancel culture”, critical race theory, gun rights and Marxism were frequent targets, as was vice president Kamala Harris for not visiting the US-Mexico border.

Senator Ted Cruz of Texas urged church pastors to become more politically engaged. He said: “If we are going to defeat the woke assault then all of us need to wake up. The slumbering church needs to wake up.”

Cruz suggested that politics is subject to a natural pendulum swing that is bound to come back in Republicans’ direction. “It took Jimmy Carter to give us Ronald Reagan. Joe Biden is Jimmy Carter 2.0 and I’m here to tell you: revival is coming.”