



AT CONSERVATIVE CONFERENCE, TRUMP IS STILL THE GOLDEN BOY

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A conference dedicated to the future of the conservative movement turned into an ode to Donald Trump on Friday as speakers declared their fealty to the former president and attendees posed for selfies with a golden statue of his likeness.

As the Republican Party grapples with deep divisions over the extent to which they should embrace Trump after losing the White House and both chambers of Congress, those gathered at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference made clear they are not ready to move on from the former president — or from his baseless charges that the November election was rigged against him.

“Donald J. Trump ain’t going anywhere,” said Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, one of several potential 2024 presidential contenders who spoke at the event, being held this year in Orlando to bypass COVID-19 restrictions.

Trump on Sunday will be making his first post-presidential appearance at the conference, and aides say he will use the speech to reassert his power.

The program underscored the split raging within the GOP, as many establishment voices argue the party must move on from Trump to win back the suburban voters who abandoned them in November, putting President Joe Biden in the White House. Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell and others worry Trump will undermine the party’s political future if he and his conspiracy theories continue to dominate Republican politics.

But at the conference, speakers continued to fan disinformation and conspiracy theories about the 2020 election, with panels dedicated to amplifying false claims of mass voter fraud that have been dismissed by the courts, state election officials and Trump’s own administration.

Indeed, Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., another potential 2024 hopeful, drew among the loudest applause and a standing ovation when he bragged about challenging the election certification on Jan. 6 despite the storming of the Capitol building by Trump supporters trying to halt the process.

“I thought it was an important stand to take,” he said.

Others argued the party would lose if it turned its back on Trump and alienated the working-class voters drawn to his populist message.

“We cannot — we will not — go back to the days of the failed Republican establishment of yesteryear,” said Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who outlined a new Trumpian GOP agenda focused on restrictive immigration policies, opposition to China and limiting military

engagement.



"We will not win the future by trying to go back to where the Republican Party used to be," echoed Florida Sen. Rick Scott, who chairs the fundraising committee tasked with electing Republicans to the Senate. "If we do, we will lose the working base that President Trump so animated. We're going to lose elections across the country, and ultimately we're going to lose our nation."

Scott is dismissing pressure on him to "mediate between warring factions on the right" or "mediate the war of words between the party leaders." He has refused to take sides in the bitter ongoing fight between Trump and McConnell, who blamed Trump for inciting the deadly Capitol riot but ultimately voted to acquit him at his impeachment trial earlier this month.

"I'm not going to mediate anything," he said, criticizing those who "prefer to fan the flames of a civil war on our side" as "foolish" and "ridiculous."

But in speeches throughout the day, the GOP turmoil was front and center. Trump's eldest son, Donald Trump Jr., lit into Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney, the No. 3 House Republican, who has faced tremendous backlash for her vote to impeach Trump for inciting the Capitol riot.

And as the program was wrapping up, Trump issued a statement endorsing Max Miller, a former staffer who has now launched a campaign challenging Ohio Rep. Anthony Gonzalez, another Republican who voted in favor of impeachment.

Kimberly Guilfoyle, a former Fox News Channel host and Donald Trump Jr.'s girlfriend, offered a pointed message to those who stand in opposition to the former president, who will not arrive at the conference until Sunday but was present in spirit in the form of a large golden statue erected in a merchandise show booth, where attendees could pose for pictures with it.

"We bid a farewell to the weak-kneed, the spineless and the cowards that are posing in D.C. pretending that they're working for the people," she said. "Let's send them a pink slip straight from CPAC."

Trump Jr., who labeled the conference "TPAC" in honor of his father, hyped the return of his father and the "Make America Great Again" platform to the spotlight.

"I imagine it will not be what we call a 'low-energy' speech," he said. "And I assure you that it will solidify Donald Trump and all of your feelings about the MAGA movement as the future of the Republican Party."

AP Photo/John Raoux.