

Opinion | For The Post, the wrong choice at the worst possible time

The newspaper blundered by not endorsing a candidate for president.

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By Ruth Marcus

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I love The Washington Post, deep in my bones. Last month marked my 40th year of proud work for the institution, in the newsroom and in the Opinions section. I have never been more disappointed in the newspaper than I am today, with the tragically flawed decision not to make an endorsement in the presidential race.

At a moment when The Post should have been stepping forward to sound the clarion call about the multiple dangers that Donald Trump poses to the nation and the world, it has chosen instead to pull back. That is the wrong choice at the worst possible time.

I write — I dissent — from the perspective of someone who spent two decades as a member of The Post’s editorial board. (I stepped away last year.) From that experience, I can say: you win some and lose some. No one, perhaps not even the editorial page editor, agrees with every position the board takes. At bottom, the owner of the newspaper is entitled to have an editorial page that reflects the owner’s point of view.

In addition, let’s not overestimate the significance of presidential endorsements. As much as we might like to believe otherwise, they have limited persuasive value for the vanishingly small number of undecided voters. They are distinct from endorsements for local office, involving issues and personalities about which voters might have scant knowledge; in these circumstances, editorial boards can serve as useful, trusted proxies. A presidential endorsement serves a different purpose: to reflect the soul and underlying values of the institution.

A vibrant newspaper can survive and even flourish without making presidential endorsements; The Post itself declined to make endorsements for many years before it began doing so regularly in 1976, as publisher and chief executive officer William Lewis pointed out in his [explanation for the decision](#) to halt the practice. If The Post had announced after this election that it would stop endorsing [presidential candidates](#), I might have disagreed with that decision, but I would not consider it out of bounds. The practice of endorsements comes with some costs. The newsroom and the Opinions section maintain rigorous separation, but it is difficult to make that case to an official aggrieved by the failure to secure an endorsement.

This is not the time to make such a shift. It is the time to speak out, as loudly and convincingly as possible, to make the case that we made in 2016 and again in 2020: that Trump is dangerously unfit to hold the highest office in the land.

This was The Post on [Oct. 13, 2016](#): “Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump is dreadful, that is true — uniquely unqualified as a presidential candidate. If we believed that Ms. Clinton were the lesser of two evils, we might well urge you to vote for her anyway — that is how strongly we feel about Mr. Trump,” the editorial board wrote in endorsing Hillary Clinton. Trump, it — we because I was a member of the board then — said, “has shown himself to be bigoted, ignorant, deceitful, narcissistic, vengeful, petty, misogynistic, fiscally reckless, intellectually lazy, contemptuous of democracy and enamored of America’s enemies. As president, he would pose a grave danger to the nation and the world.”

Every word of that proved sadly true.

This was The Post on Sept. 28, 2020: It — we — called Trump “the worst president of modern times,” in endorsing Joe Biden “Democracy is at risk, at home and around the world,” the editorial warned. “The nation desperately needs a president who will respect its public servants; stand up for the rule of law; acknowledge Congress’s constitutional role; and work for the public good, not his private benefit.”

What has changed since then? Trump’s behavior has only gotten worse — and we have learned only more disturbing things about him. Most significantly, he disputed the results of a fair election that he lost and sought to prevent the peaceful transfer of power. He encouraged an insurrection that threatened the life of his own vice president — leading to his second impeachment — and then defended the insurrectionists as “hostages.” He will not accept the reality of his 2020 loss or pledge to respect the results of next month’s voting, unless it concludes in his favor.

He has threatened to “terminate” the Constitution. He has demeaned his opponent, Vice President Kamala Harris, as “mentally impaired.” He has vowed to fire the special counsel who brought two criminal cases against him and “go after” his political enemies. He wants to use the military to pursue domestic opponents — “radical left lunatics” like former House speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-California) or Rep. Adam Schiff (D-California) — and rout out “the enemy from within.”

I could keep going but you know all this, and you get my point: What self-respecting news organization could abandon its entrenched practice of making presidential endorsements in the face of all this?

Lewis, in his publisher’s note, called this move “consistent with the values The Post has always stood for and what we hope for in a leader: character and courage in service to the American ethic, veneration for the rule of law, and respect for human freedom in all its aspects.” It was, he added, “a statement in support of our readers’ ability to make up their own minds on this, the most consequential of American decisions — whom to vote for as the next president.”

But asserting that doesn’t make it so. Withholding judgment does not serve our readers — it disrespects them. And expressing our institutional bottom line on Trump would not undermine our independence any more than our choices did in 1976, 1980, 1984, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016 or 2020. We were an independent newspaper then and, I hope, remain one today.

Many friends and readers have reached out today, saying they planned to cancel their subscriptions or had already done so. I understand, and share, your anger. I think the best answer, for you and for me, may be embodied in this column: You are reading it, on the same platform, in the same newspaper, that has so gravely disappointed you.