My MAGA Odyssey

By Rich Logis

E-book

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I. Why I Gravitated to MAGA

I was born January 30, 1977, in Westchester County, New York.

My father worked in a variety of public and private sector jobs. He was an elevator inspector for the city of New York; delivered for Airborne Express; sold cars for a dealership; and was a field technician for a utility. My mother worked in the commercial insurance industry for decades; she also worked for a few years as a Walmart manager.

I have two younger brothers and a younger sister.

Our household was not a wealthy one, but my siblings and I never wanted for anything. My earliest memory of earning money was at 9 years old, going door-to-door to sell seashells I had collected on family vacations to Virginia Beach and Myrtle Beach.

I have a large extended family, mostly on my mother's side. I have fond memories of my cousins' legendary

Christmas parties; I even dressed as Santa a few times. One family brush with greatness: a great uncle once sold a Cadillac to Joe DiMaggio.

Our interests were music and sports, especially my favorite, basketball. I remember many games of hoops, baseball, and football with my cousins.

When I was 12, my family moved from urban Yonkers, New York, to Shrub Oak, a bucolic hamlet in the town of Yorktown, an hour from New York City. We were a quintessential middle-class household: small house, big yard, two modest cars, kids in public school, and a lake in our community that we considered a second home.

Basketball was my “happy space.” It provided camaraderie with my friends and was an outlet for my thirst for competition. I was lanky at 6 feet, 3 inches and not a particularly gifted athlete, but I could shoot layups, dribble and pass with either hand, had strong peripheral vision, and if the defender gave me space, I could hit jump shots from distance.

I even coined my own line of trash talk: “I take it as a personal insult when a defender gives me space.” I definitely had a chip on my shoulder; looking back on it, basketball was where I began to develop my slightly

obsessive nature. I reveled in winning, but I was more driven by my desire to avoid the pain of losing.

I have mostly fond memories of high school. I avoided gossipy cliques, finding them boring. I didn't have many friends, but was tight with the ones I did have. I was neither a loner nor Mr. Gregarious.

But I was lazy. My studies were just not that important to me.

While I was in high school my parents' (rest in peace to both) marriage began to strain. They stayed together for several more years, but it became a marriage in name only. They finally divorced.

Some of the tension, undoubtedly, stemmed from our financial struggles. In my senior year of high school, our home — where I'd spent my formative adolescent years — was foreclosed on.

I don't recall my parents showing much emotion about it, but I do remember thinking they probably felt shame and embarrassment. We moved to a nearby house that we rented. My parents would never again own a home.

Politics were not really all that present in our home. We never discussed the issues of the day at the dinner table. My parents were opinionated, especially about economic topics. I recall many a conversation between them about their financial anxieties, and how so many middle-class households could never get ahead.

But to my knowledge, my mother and father never voted. My siblings were also apolitical. Most of my relatives were indifferent to politics as well.

My own interest in politics blossomed thanks to our neighbors across the street. Judy and Buddy DeSantes started talking to me about the world when I was 17. Liberal, progressive Democrats, they were always hospitable. Once they complimented me on my precociousness, and I had to look it up in the dictionary! They'd graciously gift me their issues of *The Nation*, *Mother Jones* and *The New Republic* after they'd read them. The writers were exciting and vibrant: Molly Ivins; Victor Navasky; Jim Hightower.

It was Judy and Buddy who turned me on to a political activist named Ralph Nader. That was momentous; more on Nader in a bit.

All these years later I'm still struck by how *prepared* they always were in arguing their points; sometimes I found myself agreeing, and sometimes I asked for elaboration. I wasn't cognizant of how influential our many talks — sometimes spanning hours — were.
They had a license plate that read "MUGWUMPS." The Mugwumps were originally Republican activists in post-bellum America who opposed corruption and promoted honest government. I remember my father sneering derisively at the term.

Both DeSanteses are deceased; I'm sorry I never thanked them for being the first to hone my political sensibilities.

Though I'm loath to speak for anyone, especially those who have passed, I am pretty certain that while they would have respected my decision to support Trump, it would have mystified them and probably disappointed them.

First Brushes With Political Activism

My entrée into MAGA actually started while I was in college, at the turn of the century.

I attended Iona University, in the New York suburb of New Rochelle, majoring in English with a minor in Religious Studies.

My first two years of college were instrumental in helping me grow into a more confident, mature man. My junior and senior years were pivotal in shaping my life-long passion for politics.

In my junior year, we held a rally on campus in opposition to the Kosovo War, which lasted from February 1998 to June 1999. Admittedly, I knew next-to-nothing about the causes and forces that led to 16 months of bloody conflict; but it was the first time I thought about the world outside my own little orbit.

I began my final year of college in September 1999. I was focused not only on keeping my grades high, but figuring out what to do after graduation. I wanted to earn a PhD in Shakespearean studies at the University of Cambridge in England. Iona nominated me to be a Fulbright Scholar, but I wasn't selected.

I spent a huge amount of time in the library and the all-night computer lab. One night, three months before graduation, I was at my favorite spot in the library: top floor, corner unit. It felt a bit like an island. After several hours of work, I took a copy of that day's *New York Times* on my way out.

Once I got home, I made myself a snack, sat in my Archie Bunker-style chair and began reading the paper. On page 18, I landed on a headline that grabbed my attention:

THE 2000 CAMPAIGN: THE GREEN PARTY; Vowing to Restore Confidence, Nader Joins Race

My mind went back to the many friendly kitchen table arguments I'd had with Judy and Buddy. As the months went on, I closely followed the campaign. By this time, Texas Gov. George W. Bush and Vice President Al Gore had launched their respective presidential campaigns.

By graduation, I was fully in Nader's corner. He viewed the Republican and Democratic parties as indistinguishable from each other. More than policy ideas, this was what I found most appealing about his third-party bid.

A Working Journalist

My first job out of college was as a newspaper reporter, first for *The Patent Trader* in New York's Westchester County. I covered local news, education, you name it; everything but sports. After the *Trader*, I reported for *The Item* and *The Standard Star*, a couple of Gannett weeklies in the same area.

I conducted a handful of celebrity interviews — Hulk Hogan, Cyndi Lauper, Tom Brokaw. But the most memorable was with a well-known New York businessman: Donald Trump.

He wanted to build a private golf course in the Town of Yorktown. Critics raised concerns about the pesticides and other chemicals needed to treat the course's grass. Then a source tipped me off about something very few people knew: Trump wanted to use a public body of water for the course.

My research led me to a golf course Trump owned in Palm Beach County, Florida. I learned that the course's annual water usage exceeded its municipally-approved allotment by tens of thousands of gallons.

I contacted Trump to give him a chance to respond to the local opposition. He insisted he would do everything by the book, and that the course would be among the finest in the world. I asked about the water overuse at his Florida course. He said almost every golf course overused its allotment, and my research found that to be true.

My article ran on the front page of the local Gannett daily, *The Journal News*. The next day, our newsroom received a fax from The Trump Organization: Trump had decided to

abandon his plans for the golf course. No reason was given. I called Trump, and asked what he intended to do with the land, which comprised over 400 acres.

“Now, why would I tell you that?” he said.

“Because I asked,” I countered, prompting him to chuckle.

I don’t know if he backed out because of my article. Years later, my source on the story donated the land to the state of New York, which named it Donald J. Trump State Park. Over the last several years, some New York lawmakers have tried to rename it, but the name remains.

I worked as a reporter for four years. My time as a journalist instilled in me a fierce sense of fairness. I also honed my “bullshit detector” — or so I thought.

I saw the two major political parties as essentially two sides of the same coin: organizations more motivated by power, fame and riches than public service.

I clung to my alienation from the nation’s powerful elites, voting for third-party candidates even though I knew they stood zero chance of winning. Maintaining a rogue political identity was crucial for me; I was consistently independent, and not easily influenced — or so I thought.

The 2000 presidential election tested Americans' patience, but confirmed that our democracy was the stablest in the world. To Gore's credit, he conceded to Bush without acrimony or malice.

Less than a year later, however, we learned that we were not immune from the terrorism and mass murders we thought occurred solely in far-off lands.

As a journalist, my immediate processing of 9/11 was to chase the story, to try to make sense of what seemed surreal and beyond my comprehension.

Several of the municipalities in Westchester County declared states of emergency. In one village, officers armed with AR-15s manned entrances to government buildings and directed traffic.

Though I didn't consider myself a pacifist, I had a natural aversion to war. But after 9/11, I supported the invasion of Afghanistan.

About a year later, as Bush worked to rally support for a second Iraq war, I distinctly remember thinking: Why? I was no foreign policy expert, but the claim about weapons of mass destruction seemed quite dubious. Yet almost

every Republican in Congress — and about 40% of Democrats (including then-Sens. Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden) — supported the resolution authorizing the invasion.

To my mind, it was yet another example of how the two major parties were practically the same.

A Frustrated Independent

I ended my short journalism career in 2004. I transitioned into a new career in the financial services industry, as an insurance agent and investments adviser. I was self-employed, and struggled to make a livable income. I worked side jobs to earn money, as a driving instructor and mover, among other things.

Working in finance made me more attuned to the everyday anxieties felt by millions of families. Most of my clients were middle-class small business owners. I discovered just how Herculean a struggle it was for most of them to make ends meet. I was shocked how many had few, if any, assets, just lengthy lists of debts, liabilities and over-leverage.

It was in the mid-aughts that I began noticing unconventional mortgages that I was unable to decipher.

The county I grew up in, Westchester, has long had among the highest property taxes in the nation. As I sat in kitchens and living rooms of mid-six- or seven-figure homes, their extremely low monthly mortgage payments made zero sense to me.

In 2008 I made another career change, starting my own business selling a variety of highly-regulated tech business hardware and software — not the kinds of things you can get at a big-box retail store.

That same year, those mortgages that made no sense suddenly did: So many of those who had proudly negotiated what they thought were sweetheart loans had been preyed upon by lenders with impunity.

I was stunned by the widespread economic and financial devastation wrought by loans that weren't worth the paper they were printed on. I thought about the humiliation felt by my parents when our home — paid for by pooling their life savings — was foreclosed on.

I wondered how our federal government could have possibly allowed such a crisis to unfold.

When Barack Obama won the presidency in 2008, I did not see him as the caricature portrayed by the Republican

Party. Still, I distrusted him. He reminded me of some of the slick-talking salesmen I'd met at professional and social gatherings.

I agreed with him that health care reform was long overdue, but I opposed the Affordable Care Act without taking much time to learn the details.

In 2012 I met some men who broadcast a weekly AM radio show in Philadelphia from the attic of a Polish-American center near the Liberty Bell. The show, "American Workers Radio," focuses on American manufacturing and small business entrepreneurship. After a few appearances in the months before the 2012 presidential election, they asked if I'd be a regular guest. At this point in my amateur political career, I was ecstatic to use any platform I could to rail against our duopolistic political system that enabled millions to lose their homes, their retirement savings, and their jobs. My combative tone quickly found favor with listeners.

I'd casually followed the rise of the Tea Party movement; I welcomed its protests against Washington politicians. Once some of the Tea Party candidates were elected, however, they did not impress. They seemed to want the same limelight as the elected officials they'd spent years besmirching as out of touch.

I was political, but ignorant. It was more comforting to complain than to be curious. It felt good to oppose both major parties, which dominated a system that guaranteed one of their candidates would win. It didn't seem all that democratic to me.

In 2015, my unwavering dissatisfaction reached its apogee: it appeared the nominees for the 2016 presidential election were likely going to be Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush.

As I saw it, this was not just further proof of a uniparty; it would usher in a quasi-monarchy. In the span of less than three decades, we'd already had three Bush administrations and two Clinton administrations.

Another Bush or another Clinton? I resented what I perceived as hubristic entitlement; neither Bush nor Clinton were owed their respective parties' nominations. The situation reinforced my belief that the two major parties didn't need to play by the rules we plebes were obliged to follow.

Enter Donald Trump

I was not one of those who said, “I was a Trump supporter the moment he rode down the escalator.” For the first few months after he declared his candidacy in June 2015, I wasn’t on the “Trump train,” mostly because I didn’t think he had any chance of winning. I was somewhat familiar with what he had been up to, thanks to the New York tabloids. (I never watched The Apprentice.) Years before Trump ran for office, I’d occasionally hear him talk about the loss of American jobs overseas, and I usually nodded my head in agreement.

I was not enamored with him, but was keeping my eye on Trump happenings. I was resigned, though, to another likely third-party vote, even though I had no idea for whom.

By the end of the year, I realized that both major parties considered Trump a greater threat than Nader had been. That seriously piqued my interest. My New Year’s resolution was to give serious consideration to Trump’s campaign to make America great again.

Given my longtime suspicion of the two-party system, I decided Trump was the candidate I’d been waiting for: Someone who not only was willing to obliterate the established political order, but seemed *able* to do so.

I also liked his nativism/isolationism. Why try to remedy conflicts and problems abroad when we had so many problems and challenges at home? I found it refreshing that Trump loudly questioned why the United States saw fit to involve itself in seemingly every skirmish and war around the globe.

I remembered long-ago conversations with Judy and Buddy, who also asked why the US always interjected itself into far-off corners of the world.

Trump's economic isolationism also appealed to me; I agreed that we needed to rebuild American manufacturing rather than send jobs overseas.

I didn't relate to Trump's fame and wealth. I did, however, relate to someone who seemed comfortable in his own skin — a son of a bitch who didn't care what anyone thought of him. And Trump inspired me to feel that I politically belonged, that I was civically invested in our democracy.

Before Trump burst into my life, I wasn't an avid reader of newspapers and magazines, nor did I watch the major networks much. I mainly kept myself up to date with headlines and news stories on Google and Yahoo.

I realize now I was not as informed as I should have been, and that left me politically confused.

Becoming a MAGA Warrior

My first exposure to the Trump campaign came at a February 2016 meeting of volunteers in Broward County, Florida. Dolly Trevino Rump, the head of Trump's Broward efforts, led a three-hour boot camp at which she taught 100 of us how to make calls to prospective voters, how and where to place signs, and other things.

It was somewhat dizzying for me; I'd never appreciated how reliant campaigns are on volunteers. I was thrilled when Rump let me punch up the campaign's voter outreach call script.

Over the next nine months, I thought about our state's primary election, and Election Day, every day. It was practically all I talked about in my conversations with longtime friends, new acquaintances, business associates, customers, and anyone else who crossed my path.

After I jumped on the Trump bandwagon, I increased my intake of Fox News and Rush Limbaugh. But my main source of political information came from a site I'd rarely

perused before Trump: Breitbart. It was filled with articles and commentary that fed my growing panic about the creeping socialism and communism that would take over the country if Trump lost. I obsessively pored over the comments section, which hammered away at the evils of the two parties — especially the Democratic Party.

Breitbart taught me there were Illegal immigrants everywhere, and that some were terrorists and drug dealers. I didn't own a gun, but I came to believe that Democrats who enjoyed armed security would be perfectly happy with making it onerous for law-abiding Americans to exercise their Second Amendment rights.

In addition, everything I saw or read was filtered through my new MAGA perspective. To me, it seemed the press was parroting the fear-mongering tactics of the Democratic Party and anti-Trump Republicans. I began to see the national media as what Trump said it was: a de facto publicist for Hillary Clinton and the Democrats. I loathed her as much as anyone in MAGA.

Soon, I believed that Clinton and the Democrats — in fact anyone who opposed Trump — posed existential threats to my life, livelihood, family, and nation.

I was afraid on two levels.

First, I was certain that a Clinton victory would result in the Democrats permanently capturing national political power, which would render my franchise irrelevant. Having been alienated from our two major parties for over a decade, this fear was quite palpable for me. I became convinced that a Clinton win would forever quash any chance of my being heard by the government.

Second, that fear of political irrelevance instilled in me dread of losing control of my ability to provide for my family and keep them safe.

I wasn't just your average MAGA American. I became a devoted political activist. I felt a civic calling to contribute whatever I could to elect Trump.

As a regular guest on "American Workers Radio," I loudly proclaimed my disgust at the GOP's attempts to undermine the campaign of the only Republican I thought could conquer the "Clinton machine." The aspersions cast by the Republican Party upon Trump — and all of us in his MAGA army — were just more confirmation for me that I was right all along to distrust the two-party system.

I stopped staying in touch with friends who I knew were Clinton or Sanders supporters. Time was at a premium, and I had a country to save.

I knew the litany of Trump's offensive comments: the "blood coming out of her wherever" comment about Megan Kelly; hinting at setting up a registry of Muslims; belittling the Gold Star parents of a soldier who died while serving in Iraq; and, perhaps most infamously, the *Access Hollywood* tape. They were unacceptable and indefensible, but I dutifully accepted and defended all of them.

I rationalized these remarks because I felt I was in a war to save our democracy from pernicious forces. I saw the alternative to Trump not just as a worse candidate, but as an enemy who needed to be destroyed. I was a zealous acolyte.

As laser-focused on victory as I was, I hadn't given much thought to what would come after our expected electoral win. I was in MAGA, though, for the long haul. What I did not anticipate at the time, however, was just how deeply I'd immerse myself over the next several years.

My MAGA journey was just beginning.

II. Why I Left MAGA

After the election, I was unsure what I'd do next; although, doing nothing was not an option. A few fellow MAGA Americans implored me to run for office; I never gave it serious consideration. I knew nothing about being a politician, and in all candor, I didn't have the patience to learn.

A month after Inauguration Day, a few local Republicans created a multi-week workshop about campaigning, political messaging and how to run for office.

Chris Gergen, a former paid staffer for Trump's primary campaign in Oregon, led the workshops.

I'll never forget his opening statement at the first workshop: politics is sales. Given that we had just elected a successful businessman to the highest office in the land, it felt apropos, and accurate. I was quite impressed with Chris's acumen, attention to detail and command of his trade.

After the workshop, Chris and I started chatting. We talked about our kids (we both have two daughters) and our experiences as business owners. Several hours later, the

shopping center where we held the workshop closed down for the night. There was no one left but Chris and me. Our shadowy silhouettes darted under the tall parking lot lights as we pledged to stay in touch.

My MAGA family and community continued to grow, online and in-person. I met lots of fellow MAGA Americans; their backgrounds were diverse and varied: accountants; attorneys; public sector workers; Ivy League-educated professionals.

I continued my weekly guest spot on American Workers Radio, often using my time to further burnish my MAGA bona fides. I would warn our opponents that we MAGA Americans were coming for them, as we sought to transform America in our image.

I proposed an idea to Chris: I wanted to develop my own brand as a MAGA pundit. I needed guidance; I had never hosted a podcast, or penned political freelance articles. Chris offered to help me get started; we agreed that my identity should be righteously indignant and angry — the better to fight an existential war against traitors, i.e., anyone not with MAGA.

I created The Rich Logis Show, with Chris as my editor and producer. Our tagline was:

Warning: this is The Rich Logis Show; the content you are about to hear has been deemed dangerous and inappropriate to Democrats and Tessio Republicans (a reference to Sal Tessio, the character in *The Godfather* who betrays Michael Corleone after he becomes Don)*. Listener discretion is advised.*

I billed myself as an “equal opportunity offender,” an homage to the late, venerable comedian George Carlin. I promised “4-dimensional political commentary and analysis you won't hear anywhere else.”

I produced over 150 segments; I spent thousands and thousands of dollars on the podcast, and hundreds and hundreds of hours. Here’s a sampling of some segment titles:

Trump Identity Politics: American Nationalism

Liz Warren: The Shrew Tames Herself

NY Times: An Admitted Propagandist

On my social media feeds, my biography read: *I'm not cynical; I'm just honest.*

But I was fooling myself; I wasn't being honest at all.

Consider my reaction to the August 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. After a white supremacist drove his car into a crowd of protestors, killing Heather Heyer and injuring dozens, I never once mourned what happened to her or the others. I was focused on how we could prevent what happened from tainting MAGA's image.

I didn't give Heyer and the other victims a second thought because I had completely internalized the MAGA messaging that dehumanized our "enemies." If I ever meet her mother, I will apologize to her.

In 2018, I met, and befriended, an attorney named Scott Newmark, who, along with his wife, founded a MAGA-centric club, Americans for Trump, where attendees met monthly to break bread, hear MAGA speakers and cultivate the camaraderie we felt we needed to conquer our enemies.

We met frequently over the next two years; I was recognized at the outset of every gathering, for my punditry and podcasting, and for the book I was writing: *10 Warning Signs Your Child Is Becoming a Democrat: How to Make America Grown-up Again*. The mention of the title

always prompted hearty laughs in the room. (I finished a 250-page manuscript; it sits unpublished.)

I also wrote op-eds for news sites that I read religiously: *The Federalist*; *American Thinker*; *American Greatness*; *World Net Daily*; *RealClearPolitics*; *The Daily Caller*; and *Fox*, which was an epic moment for me. Having become a parent for the second time in January 2019, I often held my sleeping baby girl in one arm while I wrote an article with my free hand on my phone.

My articles were dark, and sometimes darkly humorous (I don't say that proudly); paranoid; rife with hate, desperation and panic.

I never took an hour off from being a MAGA polemicist, to the point that I was neglecting some of my parental and spousal responsibilities. It strained my relationship with my wife and created a certain distance between my kids and me. When my wife complained about it, I would argue that I always needed to be on the attack to protect our family.

Initial Doubts

When the COVID pandemic swept the country, I followed Trump's lead and didn't take it seriously. I mocked senior citizens in particular, joking that grandma and grandpa were living in COVID fallout shelters. I thought forcing people to wear masks to protect them, and others, was silly and unnecessary; I wore a mask primarily because the businesses I frequented mandated them.

I didn't buy the entire MAGA spin on COVID, though. For example, I didn't think it was a bioweapon manufactured to prevent Trump's reelection.

Any criticisms of Trump I had, I kept to myself. Going public with even a mild rebuke of the president would mean exile from MAGA. You would be branded as an apostate and a traitor to the cause.

I kept quiet even as Trump largely botched his handling of the pandemic. While I applauded his championing of Operation Warp Speed (the effort to accelerate the development of a vaccine), I found it increasingly intolerable to watch his administration's daily press briefings in the summer of 2020. When Trump spoke, he meandered, talking about completely unrelated topics.

I found his recommendations to take hydroxychloroquine and inject a “disinfectant” to be absurd. But as with Charlottesville, I was less upset about Trump’s bizarre comments than I was about their possibly sabotaging his chances of reelection.

None of Trump’s COVID follies lessened my zealous support of MAGA. I still willingly followed the party line. So, when protests and riots broke out in the wake of George Floyd’s murder in 2020, I parroted the argument that the unrest proved Democrats were a threat to public safety. I considered Black Lives Matter a domestic terrorist organization. I stockpiled thousands of rounds of ammunition — a “just in case” supply.

As we neared the 2020 election, I worked hard to register voters and persuade them to vote for Trump.

That year felt different from 2016, when I was confident Trump would win. This time around, I could tell it was going to be very close.

On Election night, I went to a MAGA friend’s home to watch the returns on Fox. Past midnight, I did some quick math and concluded that we likely needed a mini-miracle to win.

Then, in the early morning hours, Trump addressed the nation. He declared that his voters — indeed the whole country — were the victims of an unprecedented fraud, perpetrated by Biden and the Democrats, and that he had won reelection.

I wasn't sure what to believe; I was going to remain hopeful, but I resisted the allure of believing in a miracle. I was willing to let the legal process play itself out; if there was evidence of massive and systemic voter fraud, I would have been the first to say Trump was right.

On December 11, the Supreme Court extinguished the Trump campaign's last legal hope when it threw out Texas' lawsuit challenging the results in Georgia, Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

I was unsurprised at the verdict. I didn't realize it at the time, but this was the moment when I began my journey out of MAGA.

By the time Trump rallied his supporters in Washington, D.C. on January 6, I had no desire to attend. I had grown tired of Trump's nonstop claims that the election was stolen. It was clear to me that he was lying. But as I had in the past, I kept my doubts to myself. I knew that if I

publicly challenged the election fraud narrative, many in MAGA would brand me as a Tessio — a traitor.

As the rioters breached the Capitol, I was apoplectic — not because the police were violently overwhelmed, and not because I was anticipating injuries and fatalities — but because the “assholes,” as I referred to the invaders, were ruining the odds of a 2024 Trump comeback.

Despite the election lies, and the insurrection inspired by them, I remained in MAGA. I gave Trump the benefit of the doubt that, as time passed, he’d pivot to preparation for the 2024 election, and the lies would mostly be forgotten.

A lot of MAGA community members conjectured that the insurrection was a set-up, an “inside job” designed to make Trump and MAGA look bad. I thought this was phantasmic, and harkened back to Sept. 11 “truthers” who thought that Bush/Cheney orchestrated that day’s events.

I did, however, adopt the MAGA position that the Democrats and most of the national media had hyperbolically elevated January 6 to a position of historical importance equal to Pearl Harbor and Sept. 11. On my Philadelphia radio show, I angrily railed against the press and Democrats for their obsession with January 6. I often joked with fellow MAGA Americans that the federal

government prosecuted some of the rioters as if they were criminal masterminds.

I stopped paying attention to January 6 coverage, cocksure that the day was relevant only to Democrats and anti-Trump Republicans and conservatives.

Three months after the insurrection, I was still working hard for MAGA. I founded a Super Political Action Committee (PAC) called: SOSS: Save Our Sunshine State. Its goal was to get Floridians to register to vote as Republicans, to keep the state from becoming "unaffordable, unsafe and unfree" as a result of the COVID-inspired influx of people from California, New York and other blue states.

After the first COVID vaccine became available in late 2020, I got my first and second doses. I felt immense pride observing how crowded the waiting area was; I believed Operation Warp Speed was Trump's landmark achievement.

It was another MAGA politician's handling of COVID that finally started me on my journey out of the movement.

Leaving MAGA: My Year of Heaven and Hell

In the first year-plus after the pandemic erupted, I was impressed with Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' leadership. He advocated for public health measures and was a staunch proponent of the vaccine.There is a well-known photograph from December 2020 of DeSantis pushing a wheelchair-bound elderly woman to get vaccinated.

In August 2021, I began to see news stories about surges in COVID deaths across Florida from the Delta variant. As a father of two young girls, what especially unnerved me was the overcrowding at children's hospitals, and the fact that some kids were dying.

Florida's infection rate was among the highest in the nation. As health officials sounded the alarm, I expected DeSantis to stay the course. He did continue encouraging vaccination; however, he abruptly reversed course on other public health recommendations, and began lobbing juvenile insults at the nation's leading infectious disease expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci.

DeSantis was opposed to mask mandates from the pandemic's earliest days. In late 2020, his position was that local officials could require masks, but couldn't

enforce the policy and issue fines. His rationale was that the worst of COVID in Florida had passed. By the time Delta showed up, he didn't simply oppose mask mandates, including in schools; he suggested defunding schools that implemented them, and even called for garnishing school officials' wages. He soon abandoned both cockamamie threats, even though he equated mask mandates for kids to child abuse.

DeSantis' about-face caught me off guard. He asked Floridians to just grin and bear Delta; his flippancy belied the maturity he'd exhibited up that point. I wasn't a fan of masks, but I didn't see them as part of a conspiracy to take away my constitutional rights. Despite my confusion, I gave DeSantis a pass because of his firm pro-vaccine stance.

Then came Newberry.

DeSantis held a news conference in that small town to voice his opposition to vaccine mandates. Two of the invited speakers claimed the COVID vaccine changed a person's RNA, and was more likely to kill or injure an individual than the disease itself.

DeSantis said nothing after the vaccine voodoo polemics. When asked the next day about the outrageous remarks,

DeSantis said he didn't remember what the speakers had said.

Not only did DeSantis permit anti-vaxxers to regurgitate debunked conspiracy theories, he engaged in behavior that infuriated me: by pretending not to remember what had been said, he insulted my intelligence.

I couldn't get out of my mind the images of desperate parents of COVID-stricken children in intensive care units, and of the parents of kids who were in morgues. I kept thinking, what if that had been one of my girls?

It was as if I ran face first into a brick wall. I didn't understand what was happening. I prided myself on being informed (even though I was informed almost entirely by right-wing sources). Had I missed something?

In the aftermath of DeSantis' egregiously irresponsible anti-vaccine activism, I began to explore information spheres outside the MAGA bubble.

I returned to reading outlets in what I once categorized as the DMIC — the Democrat Media Industrial Complex: the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and, even *The Guardian* of London. I felt a burgeoning uneasiness as I learned that some of DeSantis' staffers

had trafficked in outlandish anti-vax conspiracy theories involving the “biomedical security state,” with (who else?) the Jews in charge.

It became obvious that DeSantis was maneuvering to draw a contrast for MAGA Americans between him and Trump, who proudly touted Operation Warp Speed. The only logical explanation was that DeSantis was angling for the GOP presidential nomination in 2024.

I couldn’t fault a politician for being ambitious. But I felt duped, disappointed and betrayed. I thought DeSantis was a man of principles; rather, he was a chameleon.

This whole experience left me infused with doubt, which led me to take another fateful step. I decided to turn over another stone: the January 6 insurrection.

It was hard for me to wade into waters in which I didn’t want to swim. I was anxious about what I might find. Perhaps subconsciously, I knew what I would discover.

I knew about the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters. I thought of these motley crews as fringe hobbyists — hangers-on who treated politics as an excuse to socialize. I didn’t give a second thought to Trump’s command to the Proud Boys during a debate to

“stand back and stand by.” I rolled my eyes at the resulting uproar; yet again, the media were making a big deal of nothing, I thought.

Domestic, Trump-inspired violent extremists? Yawn.

But my search for information about January 6 led to a discovery: these were not irrelevant groups. That’s why Trump did not renounce them. They were his allies, and they had the blessing of the most powerful person in the world. That meant they had been my allies, as well.

What had I done? How could I have missed what was undeniable? Like with Charlottesville, I dismissed the violence on January 6 as trivial, all because of my allegiance to MAGA. I knew Trump’s rhetoric had always been incendiary; it was a feature, not a bug, of the movement. Now I asked myself a very uncomfortable question: would I have downplayed the violence to the parents, children and loved ones of the US Capitol Police?

I was complicit, having remained silent over Trump’s inflammatory, inciting language. The protestors and police who died during and after the attack on the Capitol would still be alive if not for Trump.

I felt rage, confusion, shock, and, most acutely, shame. I deserved to be inextricably linked to the domestic terrorist groups I had once yawned at.

In spite of what I had discovered, it would take another year for me to walk away from MAGA. I refer to it as my Year of Heaven and Hell.

The initial step for me was to take full accountability for my actions. Every article I wrote, every podcast I produced, every speech I made — it was all my doing.

That was the easy part. The true challenge lay in cutting myself off from what had become my community. It was excruciating to even consider it. I had become wholly invested in MAGA with all of my being. It was my family, my purpose. My identity and social status depended on it.

At night, home alone with my thoughts, I would get overwhelmed by the memories of everything I had done and experienced over the past several years. My MAGA life flashed before my eyes.

I'd think about my slavish devotion to Trump. Then I'd imagine the attack on the Capitol, and how I flippantly disregarded it. Election night 2016 and its euphoria would flood in, along with the adrenaline rush of seeing my

articles published on right-wing websites. Next would come a memory of Trump's Big Lie about the election, followed by a vision of DeSantis and his COVID capos.

Over time, I came to recognize that for the past six years, I had never really taken a break from the trauma, desperation, and panic that were part and parcel of being a dedicated MAGA American.

As I tried to reckon with all of this, I found myself in an internal tug of war. My conscience and profound doubts battled with my fear of losing my community.

One day, I'd lunch with close MAGA friends, anxiously worrying that they would detect my personal and political turmoil. On another day, I'd howl, "the liberals from New York are coming!"

The long nights of mental turmoil got longer. It felt as if my morals were in combat with my dignity. Walking away from MAGA would be an acknowledgment of a huge personal failure on my part.

My sense of alienation from the movement intensified in February 2022, when the Republican National Committee deemed the insurrection "legitimate political discourse."

I began to realize that MAGA was what I wanted it to be, not what it actually was.

In May 2022, I disbanded SOSS.

Around this time, an 18-year-old with an AR-15-style rifle strode into Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas and went on a shooting rampage, killing 19 students and two teachers, while injuring more than a dozen more.

By happenstance, I had planned on selling my AR-15 that day. En route to the firearm dealer, I listened, distraught, to the coverage. Like during the Delta COVID surge, I imagined the scenes at the school: blood-splattered classrooms, screaming parents, the deafening screeching of ambulance sirens.

During my years in MAGA, I tended to look past the deaths caused by mass shootings. I would fall back on the trope that Democrats, somehow, were the real culprits, and would seek to punish law-abiding gun owners for the actions of a few lunatics. I didn't question the gun lobby's arguments that if people just had more guns, we'd all be safer.

I think because I was already in the midst of a monumental inner struggle about my MAGA beliefs,

Uvalde proved to be a crucial turning point for me. With my newfound open-mindedness, I forced myself to watch interviews with the parents and friends of the children who were killed. I listened to one Republican politician after another prattle on about mental health and hardening school doors, and I grew more and more incensed.

I also felt a powerful sense of guilt; had my idolatry of guns and the Second Amendment made mass shootings like Uvalde more likely?

By this time, I had already distanced myself from most of my fellow MAGA Americans. That gave me the mental space I needed to make my final decision. After the lies about January 6 and COVID, followed by Uvalde, I came to understand that choosing to remain in MAGA would mean that I accepted avoidable deaths and suffering and defended right-wing anarchy. Regardless of how creative my excuses for staying in the movement were, I refused to bullshit myself any longer. I had to leave MAGA.

I left, quietly, around Independence Day of 2022. This was unintentional — consciously, at least. To paraphrase Ernest Hemingway: my personal and political epiphany occurred gradually, and then suddenly all at once.

Reconciliation, Forgiveness, Liberation

A few weeks later I began thinking about making my decision to leave MAGA public. I definitely had some strong reservations. It's hard for us humans to apologize and acknowledge the errors of our ways. To do it so nakedly in front of the world? That was a scary idea.

But I got over my hesitancy. Since I had been unapologetic as a Trump surrogate, I determined that it was incumbent upon me to try to right the wrongs I had perpetrated.

In early August, I met via social media an editor at *Occupy Democrats*, a hyper-left online news and opinion site. The editor gave me the green light to publish my mea culpa. Leaving MAGA had not shifted my political pendulum from the far right to the far left, but here was an outlet that was going to give me the platform I needed.

Imagine, if you will, my hand hovering over my computer mouse, the cursor pointed squarely in the center of the "publish" button, my op-ed waiting patiently to be shot out into the permanent ether of the Internet. I felt equal parts exhilaration and fear: exhilaration because I had mustered the gumption to pronounce to the world that I was wrong, and fear because of the finality of leaving.

Once gone, there was no going back.

With my heart pounding, I hit “publish,” and changed my life.

I thought little, if anything would come of my article. I didn’t think anyone would care.

But, almost instantly, emails and social media comments flooded in: gratitude; compliments about my “courage” (which humbled and embarrassed me); stories from complete strangers about their loved ones and friends who remained in the thrall of MAGA.

This overwhelming outpouring was a wonderful validation of my choice. I felt liberated. It was as if my view of the world had been through a tiny aperture that was nearly closed, and now it was wide open, with more light shining through than I had ever remembered.

Leaving MAGA helped mend my relationship with my wife and kids. I was fighting imaginary tyranny, but had become a kind of tyrant in my own home. No more.

I had other personal matters to attend to, as well: reconciliation (I hoped) with those I had cut out of my life

after I joined MAGA. I said to each of them: I thought horrible thoughts about you. I will understand if you don't accept my apology, but I need to apologize to you.

Happily, all welcomed me back. A former mentor of mine, from college, said to me: "I knew you'd always come back."

The grace shown to me empowered me to forgive myself. To err is to human, to forgive divine. I found an unexpected inner peace. For all the mythology of rugged individualism in the MAGA community, there is mainly conformity. I reclaimed my individuality after leaving.

Since I left the movement, I have published a number of articles denouncing MAGA. But I never denigrate MAGA Americans.

Most people in MAGA are good, decent folks who had valid reasons for the choices they made. I won't defend ignorance, whether it's mine or someone else's; we are accountable for our actions and decisions. But it's also true that we are all susceptible to being unduly influenced. These two seemingly contradictory realities can harmoniously co-exist.

That's why I have empathy for MAGA Americans. I do hope they will one day find their way to seeing how they've been lied to about so much.

I know many will ask: "It took you *seven years* to leave?" It's a fair criticism. I don't have a good answer as to why I defended, and justified, over and over, the indefensible and the unjustifiable. I was always convinced that MAGA's adversaries were far worse. I bought into the dehumanization of our opponents. I appreciate that these answers will be unsatisfactory to many.

Of course, when we dehumanize others, we slowly kill our own humanity. That's what happened to Rich Logis, MAGA soldier. I'm very happy he's now in the rearview mirror.

As I spoke and wrote as much as I could about how I left MAGA, I decided I needed to do more to reach out to others who were in my position. That's why I founded Leaving MAGA. I want it to provide an off-ramp of sorts to those who are having doubts and/or are considering leaving the movement. It's also a safe space, a community for those who are ready to return to who they were before MAGA dug its toxic claws into their hearts and minds.

Finally, Leaving MAGA is a resource for those who want to reach out to friends and/or loved ones in the movement.
I am living proof that it’s possible to leave MAGA. Let’s get to work to again find peace with our family, friends and neighbors in MAGA.

III. Empowering Others to Leave MAGA

Part of what made my year of questioning MAGA's foundations particularly difficult — beyond having to battle the human tendency to resist change or admit error — is that I had no one I could talk to about what I was going through.

My struggle was complicated by the fact that — despite MAGA's myths about its members' rugged individualism — the movement's toxic environment separated me from my individuality. That happens in any insular group, but I believe the phenomenon is even more acute in MAGA.

While I managed to find my way out on my own, many in the movement will need an assist. That's where friends and family come in.

Millions have cut off relations with loved ones or friends who became MAGA Americans, and I understand why. I fervently believe, however, that the imperative to continue perfecting our union and democracy make it incumbent upon us to reach out to those in MAGA, to empower them to start questioning the movement's ethos.
As I noted earlier, MAGA was all-consuming for me. I never took an hour off from waging an existential,

life-or-death battle against my enemies. Attacks against Trump were attacks on us, his supporters, and strengthened our already-strong bond with him and each other. This needs to be front of mind as we consider how best to help others leave the movement.

After consulting with experts, we have devised some suggestions for how someone might endeavor to reach out to a MAGA loved one or friend. These are not one-size-fits-all recommendations; we're well aware that every individual has their own story and every relationship has its own dynamics.

For a deeper dive into this process, check out the "It's Not Too Late" webinar series, presented by Smart Politics. I also highly recommend the work of my friend Zach Elwood, who's taught me a great deal about how to converse with those with whom I disagree.

As someone who spent seven years interacting with MAGA voters on a daily basis, I can attest to the fact that they aspire to many of the same goals as those who oppose Trump: more economic opportunity; holding the corrupt accountable; good schools; safe neighborhoods; upholding our Constitutional rights, and more.

Trump voters sincerely believe he and the MAGA movement are the elixir for a variety of real and perceived economic, political, social and cultural ills.

I believe most MAGA followers are good and decent people who have lost their way and been led astray; even intelligent people, with integrity, are susceptible to being manipulated and exploited. I'm of the belief that most MAGA Americans will reach a point at which doubts do commence; the complication is what to do next, and that's where Leaving MAGA comes in.

As you begin the process of reaching out, separate your love and respect for the person from your opposition to Trump. Think about your relationship with them before MAGA.

Remember, how we interact is key; acknowledging another's beliefs does not mean concurrence or acceptance. The purpose isn't to polemicize; it's to dialogue.

For example, you'll get nowhere if you refer to MAGA as a cult, even if you believe it fits the definition of the word. People will shut down.

Instead, try something unexpected. You could ask what their values and beliefs were prior to Trump. You could ask what it would take to change their mind; if they might be overlooking pertinent facts; if their worldview might be a bit too black-and-white for a multicolored world. Relatability can be found here, as all of us have our own blind spots.

Here are some key guideposts:
Search for relatability, personally, or, perhaps, politically. Seek common ground.

Don't attack; try to understand why they believe what they do. You don't have to agree. Those with whom we differ are not our enemies.

Ask permission to introduce the possibility of reconciliation with family and friends. Ask them to think about their lives and their relationships before Trump and MAGA.

Rather than debating facts and policy, open up a respectful back-and-forth by asking something such as:

"I understand some of the reasons why you want another Trump presidency. Do you understand some of the reasons why others don't want another Trump presidency?"

This question presents an idea that the Trump supporter may never have had; continue to gently probe their beliefs without being confrontational. This potentially opens doors that had been previously shut.

After you feel you've made some progress (this will likely take a lot more than a single conversation), ask for their consent to introduce the work and stories of Leaving MAGA.

You may feel the MAGA American in your life is racist, homophobic, or unpatriotic. But saying these things will not compel them to leave MAGA. The way to start creating doubt — the necessary precursor to becoming empowered to leave MAGA — is through empathy and education.

But always remember: First empathy, then education.

This may surprise many of you, but MAGA can be summed up in a single word: community. Before MAGA, I'd never been a part of any political community, despite my passion for politics. I know that most of my fellow MAGA Americans felt that same comforting sense of belonging to something important. It's the prospect of losing that community that makes walking away so hard for people who have invested their entire being in their

MAGA identity. One of the lies we human beings tell ourselves is that we don't care what others think about us. We do care, and that's one of the reasons why it's so difficult to leave MAGA.

In MAGA, the limb of individuality is severed from the body of the individual. Leaving, though, will result in a reclamation of one's personhood and identity.

We founded Leaving MAGA to be a community and safe space for those who have left; or, have doubts and remorse about staying in MAGA, but are understandably afraid to leave. For the waverers, I have great news: if you reject the movement, your friends and family will welcome you back with more love than ever.

Leaving MAGA's impact won't just rest in my story; it will be in the stories of everyone who stands up and says: "I left, and it freed me to return to being the person I am." Some who leave MAGA will choose to keep their departure private; we respect that choice, and don't think of them as any less courageous than those who have chosen to tell their stories. But we want them to know that if they ever decide to tell their stories publicly, they will have a home with Leaving MAGA.

Our organization is unprecedented; our community is led by former true-believing MAGA Americans now working to empower other true believers to leave. As hard as I worked to help Trump get elected, and, re-elected, I will work harder to cultivate a lasting community for those who leave.

Starting in early 2024, I began to notice a steady uptick in complete strangers approaching me online to tell me they know people who no longer support Trump but are hesitant to say so publicly.

It's even more evidence that you — with Leaving MAGA's support — can make a difference.
Again: Empathy, then education. MAGA voters must be honestly engaged. Yes, there will be a lot of noise to cut through, and there will be setbacks, but this work is too important to avoid. And Leaving MAGA is here to help.

Every square inch of America has been traumatized by MAGA. This isn't good news, but it does present opportunities to heal and reconcile.

I hope you'll join me on this unlikeliest of journeys. Thank you for reading my story — a story I never thought anyone would care about.

A liberating, emancipatory sunrise awaits all those who leave MAGA.

Thank you for caring about the stories of those who left the movement; and thank you for caring about the work of Leaving MAGA.

–August 2024

P.S. Now that you've made it to the end of my story, I hope you'll consider making a tax-deductible gift to Leaving MAGA. Your generosity will help us expand our efforts to empower others to leave the movement.

To make a tax-deductible gift, please visit: https://leavingmaga.org/donate/

Thank you, on behalf of Leaving MAGA.