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Perhaps it's time for the GOP to change its mascot. I would like to propose that Republicans ditch the elephant and adopt the rhinoceros.

According to the United States national archives, the elephant became a recognizable symbol for the Republican Party in the late 19th century after the cartoonist Thomas Nast popularized the image and association in the magazine Harper's Weekly in 1874. The GOP has since embraced it and featured it regularly in political campaigns and promotional materials. Famously, the elephant is contrasted with the donkey, which has been associated with the Democratic Party in popular culture dating back to the 1820s.

In recent years, some have proposed other animals to help illustrate or describe what they see in the current presidential administration. Last month, a federal judge invoked a classic animal reference, likening President Donald Trump to "a bull in a china shop" in response to his erratic firing of federal employees.

In 2018, comedian John Mulaney famously compared the first Trump administration to a [horse loose in a hospital](#).

Rather than describe a particular individual in a new way, I have been thinking about how the Republican Party writ large has been exhibiting a troubling collective behavior that has reminded me of the rhinoceros.

No, I'm not thinking of the GOP internecine pejorative acronym "RINO" ("Republican In Name Only"). Instead, I'm thinking of the Romanian-French writer Eugène Ionesco's 1959 absurdist play "Rhinoceros."

The play is set in a small town where the protagonist named Berenger, while talking with his friend Jean in a café, witnesses a rhinoceros running through the streets. Jean at first tries to convince him that he is imagining things or daydreaming, but over the course of the three-act play more and more people in the town turn into rhinoceroses. Eventually his initially dismissive and skeptical friend Jean also turns into one, as does his love interest, Daisy.

Ionesco's creative framing highlights the dangers of mass mentality, group thinking, social pressures to conform and the chaos that can ensue as a result. (If a horse loose in a hospital is bad, imagine a raucous herd of rhinoceroses creating havoc throughout a small town.)

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It's not just fear that leads many of the humans to turn into rhinoceroses. Instead, there is a shift in desire, a cultural repositioning and social construction that results in many actually wanting to become a rhinoceros in the end. They long to be part of the crowd and, fairly quickly, collectively move from fearing the dangerous beasts to hoping to become one of them.

Throughout the play, Berenger resists the transformation and struggles to hold onto his humanity in the face of pressure from his friends and neighbors who embrace their new animalistic identities. In the last scene of the play, when it appears that every other human has transformed into a rhinoceros, Berenger offers a soliloquy in which he momentarily thinks that perhaps he made a mistake, that maybe he, too, should have given in and joined the mass movement by becoming a rhinoceros.

But in the last lines of the play, he appears to snap out of that brief self-doubt to proclaim: "People who try to hang on to their individuality always come to a bad end! Oh well, too bad! I'll take on the whole of them! I'll put up a fight against the lot of them, the whole lot of them! I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end. I'm not capitulating!"

Ionesco's play has long been interpreted as a cautionary tale about the conformity that leads to totalitarianism and the ease with which people, often ordinary people of goodwill, can be swept into dangerous ideologies.

This is why the rhinoceros could make for an apt symbol for a political party that seems enthralled with an ideological shift toward dehumanization, mass firings, international alignment not with allies in democracy but with autocrats and dictators, bullying gender and racial minorities, threatening journalistic and academic institutions and more (it's hard to follow the daily developments, which is part of the point).

A herd of rhinoceroses might capture both the uncritical conformity and the destruction reflected by congressional Republicans who have effectively handed

over their constitutional responsibility and power as a co-equal branch of government without a fight.

Despite the fact that the constitution makes clear that Congress controls the allocation of federal finances, the rhinoceros herd has permitted the executive branch to interfere with federal spending unchecked.

Despite Congress having the exclusive responsibility to pass laws, Trump declared in a meeting with state governors on Feb. 21, "We are the federal law," a statement that would be absurd if it were not already so menacing.

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Where is the autonomy of Congress? Where are the checks and balances? Where is the independence and agency necessary to raise legitimate questions about seemingly illegitimate and destructive actions coming from the executive branch?

The Trappist monk and spiritual writer Fr. [Thomas Merton](#) was inspired by Ionesco's play and wrote an essay in 1965 titled "Rain and the Rhinoceros." Merton recognized the authenticity of Ionesco's social criticism and caution, and he reflected on what the Christian response ought to be. He believed there is a moral imperative that Christians have to resist the dehumanizing ideologies that result from the kind of collective thinking represented by Ionesco's rhinoceros.

Merton explains that this kind of dangerous collectivity "needs not only to absorb everyone it can, but also implicitly to hate and destroy whoever cannot be absorbed. Paradoxically, one of the needs of collectivity is to reject certain classes, or races, or groups, in order to strengthen its own self-awareness by hating them instead of absorbing them."

Whether it is immigrants, people of color, women, transgender people, federal employees, veterans, Democrats or even those few remaining Republicans who do not conform to the collective ideology (who resist becoming rhinoceroses and therefore are labeled RINOs), the message coming from the top of the Republican Party is clear: You do not count, you are not equal, you do not have a right to exist.

Merton understood the challenge to maintain one's individuality and freedom, which he associated with one's "true self." The condition of the possibility of becoming part

of the dangerous herd is the surrender of who we really are in order to put on a "false self." Merton wrote:

Now if we take our vulnerable shell to be our true identity, if we think our mask is our true face, we will protect it with fabrications even at the cost of violating our own truth. This seems to be the collective endeavor of society: the more busily men dedicate themselves to it, the more certainly it becomes a collective illusion, until in the end we have the enormous, obsessive, uncontrollable dynamic of fabrications designed to protect mere fictitious identities — "selves," that is to say, regarded as objects. Selves that can stand back and see themselves having fun (an illusion which reassures them that they are real).

Merton's spiritual wisdom and Ionesco's social criticism provide us with a warning about the dangers of joining the herd mentality and giving up one's individuality, distinctive perspective and moral compass. It appears that this herd mentality and surrender of individuality and agency has already taken hold with a majority of Republican representatives and senators today.

As Ionesco's character Berenger notes, it is not easy to resist collective thinking, particularly when you are convinced that it is the only way to succeed, be re-elected or obtain power or influence. However, those tempted to forgo their humanity to become a rhinoceros ought to reflect on the spiritual costs, too. For, as Jesus himself once asked, "What good would it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. [View the full series.](#)