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Standing Athwart History Yelling, 'Stop Donald Trump!'

The *National Review* publishes the movement-conservative case against the Republican frontrunner.

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Last summer, George F. Will, the elder statesman of conservative pundits, declared Donald Trump “an affront to anyone devoted to the project William F. Buckley began six decades ago with the founding in 1955 of *National Review*—making conservatism intellectually respectable and politically palatable.” He urged conservatives to treat Trump as Buckley once treated the John Birch Society.

On Thursday, the *National Review* published its bull of excommunication. Its new issue leaves no doubt about where the magazine stands on the race for the GOP nomination.

Say the editors, “Trump is a philosophically unmoored political opportunist who would trash the broad conservative ideological consensus within the GOP in favor of a free-floating populism with strong-man overtones.”

The editorial savages Trump’s foreign and domestic policies alike. “For someone who wants to project strength, he has an astonishing weakness for flattery, falling for Vladimir Putin after a few coquettish bats of the eyelashes from the Russian thug,” it states. “Trump has shown no interest in limiting government, in reforming entitlements, or in the Constitution.” It finally declares that the very core of Trump’s approach is dangerous:

His obsession is with ‘winning,’ regardless of the means — a spirit that is anathema to the ordered liberty that conservatives hold dear and that depends for its preservation on limits on government power. The Tea Party represented a revival of an understanding of American greatness in these terms, an understanding to which Trump is tone-deaf at best and implicitly hostile at worst.

He appears to believe that the administrative state merely needs a new master, rather than a new dispensation that cuts it down to size and curtails its power.

This jeremiad isn't necessarily the harshest criticism of Trump that *National Review* has published. Kevin Williamson alone has gone as far on at least three occasions.

But it is the most significant criticism. It is coming from a unique institution and has already had institutional consequences. The *National Review's* publisher, Jack Fowler, announced Thursday night that the RNC has disinvited the magazine from participating in an upcoming debate that it was to moderate in partnership with CNN.

That said, the anti-Trump message didn't just come from NR editors. The issue includes contributions from 22 right-leaning intellectuals. *The Weekly Standard's* William Kristol and the Cato Institute's David Boaz don't have much in common. Neither do *Commentary's* John Podhoretz and Glenn Beck. But all are anti-Trump.

If Trump should go on to win the Republican nomination—here's Noah Millman's case that he's "poised for the strongest primary performance in modern history," and Ross Douthat's case that he is going to lose in the end—*National Review* and a number of the contributors to its symposium will be alienated from the GOP's standard bearer, and perhaps from the Republican Party as a whole, as never before.

Would the GOP be forever changed? Matthew Continetti argues that the effect Trump's nomination would have on its composition and philosophy would be profound. "Republican nominees since Ronald Reagan have been internationalist in outlook," he writes. "They have been pro-free trade and pro-immigration, have supported American leadership in global institutions, and have argued for market solutions and traditional values. A Republican Party under Donald Trump would broadly reject this attitude. It would emphasize protection in all its forms—immigration restriction, trade duties, a fortress America approach to international relations, and activist government to address health care and veterans' care. Paeans to freedom and opportunity and equality and small government would give way to admonishments to strive, to fight, to win, to profit."

At *Reason*, Matt Welch was less certain of what this symposium or Trump's popularity mean. "Many or even most of the people who make a living working in politics and political commentary—even those who think of themselves as outsiders, such as nonpartisan libertarians—inevitably begin to view their field as one dedicated primarily to ideas, ideology, philosophy, policy, and so forth," he wrote, "and NOT to the emotional, ideologically unmoored cultural passions of a given (and perhaps fleeting) moment. Trump—and more importantly, his supporters, who go all but unmentioned here—illustrate that that gap is, well, *yuuge*."

It is certainly the case that Trump and his unexpected support confound the ideological categories that the press has long used to make sense of American politics. But the fact that so many prominent conservatives and libertarians who disagree about so much all believe that Trump is worth fighting strikes me as a promising sign for those who want him to be defeated. Until now, the conservative movement hasn't quite dared to believe that Trump could actually win.

Now a broad, concerted effort to stop him has finally been joined. If it fails, principled conservatives will be forced to ask how the Republican Party can be an effective political instrument “while it is led by a man whose views on current affairs are, at so many critical points . . . so far removed from common sense? The underlying problem is whether conservatives can continue to acquiesce quietly in a rendition of the causes of the decline of the Republic and the entire Western world which is false, and, besides that, crucially different in practical emphasis from their own.”

I hope the conservatives win.