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The Line In The Sand Against Donald Trump

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I have been predicting that Donald Trump is headed for trouble because he's seeking the Republican nomination while making war on the ideological leadership of the right.

Now that leadership has struck back. Late last week, *National Review* published a symposium with 22 prominent conservative writers coming out "Against Trump."

The line-up is remarkable for its ideological diversity. It includes the populist right, in the person of Glenn Beck; the libertarian right, in the person of Cato Institute's David Boaz; the (actual) neoconservatives, in the person of William Kristol; the up-and-coming young writers, in the person of *Federalist* editor Ben Domenech; the conservative academics, in the person of Yuval Levin; the religious right, in the person of Russell Moore; the pro-free-market economists, in the person of Thomas Sowell. And so on.

What brings such a diverse group together? There are two common threads to their contributions. First, they point out Trump's record of ideological incoherence, or rather his history of sympathy for the other side. Glenn Beck writes that "three policies provided the fuel that lit the tea-party fire: the stimulus, the auto bailouts, and the bank bailouts. Barack Obama supported all three. So did Donald Trump."

Second and more profound is the fact that Trump offers as his alternative to the current state of the country, not a coherent set of ideas, but *himself* and his own imagined personal greatness.

David Boaz describes Trump's "promise that he's the guy, the man on a white horse, who can ride into Washington, fire the stupid people, hire the best people, and fix everything. He doesn't talk about policy or working with Congress. He's effectively vowing to be an American Mussolini, concentrating power in the Trump White House and governing by fiat."

Ben Domenech writes, "Trump assures voters that he will use authoritarian power for good, to help those who feel — with good reason — ignored by both parties. But ... a government of the people, by the people, and for the people is precisely what the Constitution offers, and what is most threatened by 'great men' impatient to impose their will on the nation."

Steven Hayward argue that “the conservative president we desperately need requires a paradoxical combination of boldness and restraint.”

The president will need to be bold in challenging the runaway power and reach of his own branch, against the fury of the bureaucracy itself, its client groups, and the media. This boldness is necessary to restore the restraint that a republican executive should have in our constitutional order. Trump exhibits no awareness of this supreme constitutional task [H]is inclination to understand our problems as being managerial rather than political suggests he might well set back the conservative cause if he is elected, if not make the problems of runaway executive power even worse.

William Kristol calls this approach “two-bit Caesarism,” David MacIntosh of the Club for Growth describes Trump as “a liberal wannabe strongman,” and John Podhoretz calls him the “American id.” (Sounds familiar.)

“The right” is a broad ideological persuasion, and these people stand for ideas that are different and often conflicting variants within that persuasion. What unites them against Trump is that they stand for ideas, rather than for the power and aggrandizement of a single man, which is the essence of Trumpism.

This, by the way, shows the importance of the difference between the ideological right and the “establishment.” We’ve been hearing some murmurs that the establishment, after recovering from its initial horror at his bull-in-the-china-shop routine, has decided it can live with Trump because he “has no obvious core political values” and is just a dealmaker. Anyone for whom politics is just about making deals and getting favors for their clients views a Trump administration as a bazaar of political horse-trading. By contrast, anyone for whom the right is a cause sees him as a dangerous diversion from that cause.

That bring us to the function of this *National Review* symposium, which is quite simply to draw a line in the sand.

This is something we need to do for our own integrity, first and foremost. For political commentators on the right, the fundamental challenge posed by Trump is whether we actually meant all that stuff we’ve been saying for decades, or whether we are willing to chuck it all out to jump on somebody’s political bandwagon. I’m happy to see that most of us are not.

But this symposium also serves a direct practical purpose. Its function is to help keep politicians and pundits in line, ideologically, as the primaries begin. Charles Krauthammer has warned that if Trump wins the Iowa Caucus and then picks up endorsements from bandwagon-jumping D.C. politicians, he could become the “inevitable” front-runner. Drawing a line in the sand discourages that. The hope is that this will help keep the panic of Trump’s high poll numbers and possible early primary wins from sweeping the weak-minded onto his bandwagon. It lays down a marker that supporting Trump will be considered, not a prudent political compromise, but a betrayal of the cause.

It might also help prevent such early primary wins by mobilizing the commentariat of the right. All of us have struggled with the paradox posed by that old adage about wrestling a pig. Early on, we worried that the more we wrote opposing Trump, the more we contributed to the

obsessive media focus on him at the expense of more worthy candidates. It's long past time to stop worrying about that and close ranks against Trump.

There are those who will scoff at the influence of us mere scribblers. But it would be very strange if Trump were able to cruise to the Republican nomination in the face of the united opposition of virtually the entire intellectual leadership of the right. I don't think that's possible, and I think it would be immensely destructive if it happened, because it would mean an entire political organization has become unmoored from any basic principles.

The very prospect raises some interesting and unsettling questions. Seeing the apparent gulf between the ideological leadership of the right and Trump's surprisingly strong and lasting fan base among the rank and file — if the polls are to be believed — raises some unsettling questions about what elements in the right gave an opening to this demagogue? There are a number of potential answers to consider, including the temptation to define ourselves negatively, by mere opposition to political correctness, which gives rise to the cult of the "outrageous personality," of whom none is more outrageous than Trump. Or there is the very name "conservatism" itself, with its focus on mere preservation of the past — which can be reduced, say, to a preservation of the existing racial or ethnic makeup of the country, which drives some of the cruder nativism that Trump has appealed to (not to mention the outright racist creeps he has brought out from under their rocks).

But all of that is a question for another day.

Before we can debate what the right is and what it should stand for, we have to agree that it is something and should stand for something, which is the common theme of the wide-ranging rejection of Trump. That's the line in the sand we need to draw.