



Donald Trump Unmoors Conservative Pundits At National Review

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Donald Trump is not exactly my cup of tea. But the arguments marshaled against him by National Review and its contributors in the magazine's special issue aimed at derailing his presidential candidacy are so pathetically weak — “philosophically unmoored,” to use the language with which the magazine's own editorial describes Mr. Trump — that it's enough to make me think that Mr. Trump is actually exactly the right leader for any political movement of which this magazine is the intellectual flagship.

The first contribution is from Glenn Beck, who faults Mr. Trump for supporting President Bush's bank bailouts. “Conservatives fought against the bank bailouts,” Mr. Beck proclaimed. I was against those bailouts, too, which is one reason I remember that National Review at the time was for them. You could look up the magazine's September 19, 2008 editorial, “Rescue Mission.”

“It's becoming clear that taxpayers are going to have to rescue some of the largest, most interconnected firms to prevent a worldwide financial meltdown,” the National Review editorial said. “Obviously, this means a taxpayer rescue for firms that made irresponsible bets on housing prices. Normally, we would advocate letting these firms bear the full consequences of such behavior, but there are no good options for friends of the taxpayer these days. The Treasury Department and the Fed have made clear that the alternative is the ad hoc nationalization of the country's major financial institutions.”

Got that? National Review wants to disqualify Trump for the presidency on the basis of the candidate having agreed with its own editorial position from 2008.

The rest of the issue proceeds along the same contradictory lines. On immigration, National Review manages to fault Mr. Trump simultaneously for being too permissive and too restrictionist. The Cato Institute's David Boaz complains of Mr. Trump's “nativism,” his “building a wall around America.” The talk show host Michael Medved complains that Mr. Trump's “much-heralded hard line on immigration discards pragmatic reform policies favored by the two most popular conservatives of the last half-century, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush.” Russell Moore criticizes Mr. Trump's “vitriolic — and often racist and sexist — language about immigrants.”

Yet the criticisms by Mssrs. Boaz and Medved apply just as aptly to the editorial against Mr. Trump by National Review's own editors. It says, "He pledges to build a wall along the southern border and to make Mexico pay for it. We need more fencing at the border, but the promise to make Mexico pay for it is silly bluster. Trump says he will put a big door in his beautiful wall, an implicit endorsement of the dismayingly conventional view that current levels of legal immigration are fine."

The editorial denounces Mr. Trump's approach as "a poorly disguised amnesty (and a version of a similarly idiotic idea that appeared in one of Washington's periodic 'comprehensive' immigration reforms)." What Mr. Medved calls "pragmatic" and "popular," the editorial denounces as "idiotic." Which is it? "Philosophically unmoored," indeed.

Nor is immigration the only subject on which National Review's standards for Donald Trump would also have disqualified Ronald Reagan. Mr. Moore faults Mr. Trump for having "abandoned one wife after another for a younger woman." Ronald Reagan's first wife, Jane Wyman, was born in 1917; Nancy Reagan was born in 1921. Do conservatives think divorce is more politically or morally acceptable if a man moves on to a new marriage with an *older* woman? Or if the divorced man remains single, or in an unmarried relationship?

Both the National Review editorial and several of the contributors, including David Boaz and Dana Loesch, fault Mr. Trump for using or attempting to use the government's eminent domain condemnation power to acquire private property to advance his own business interests. Yet National Review, along with nearly every other conservative organization, publication, and Republican presidential candidate, support the Keystone XL oil pipeline, an exercise in eminent domain for private interests that makes the City of New London's taking of Susette Kelo's little pink house look like small potatoes by comparison.

The magazine implies that Mr. Trump is a racist. John Podhoretz writes of Mr. Trump's "repellent assertion that the first black president needed to prove to Trump's satisfaction that he was actually an American." Mr. Medved writes, "even those who take Trump at his word — accepting his declaration that he qualifies as the least racist individual in the nation — can imagine the parade of negative ads the Democrats are already preparing for radio stations with mainly black audiences and for Spanish-language television." A contribution to the magazine by Mona Charen manages, simultaneously, to fault Mr. Trump for giving money to Al Sharpton, who was not previously known as a magnet for contributions by anti-black bigots.

It's pretty rich for National Review, which was late and slow on civil rights, to oppose Mr. Trump on grounds of racial insensitivity at a moment when even the New York Times is running articles quoting Mr. Trump's black friends such as Don King and Mike Tyson defending his bona fides. Does modern conservatism really want to stand for the proposition that a presidential candidate should be disqualified because the Democrats might run ads distorting the candidate's record to accuse the candidate, falsely, of racism?

The GOP could nominate a Ben Carson-Herman Cain ticket and pledge to appoint Alan Keyes as secretary of state and Condoleezza Rice as secretary of defense and the Democrats would still run the same negative advertisements. As an anti-Trump argument, absent incontrovertible proof

of actual racist behavior, this smacks of a surrender to political correctness and hair-trigger sensitivity of the sort that understandably grates on Mr. Trump's supporters.

Yuval Levin opposes Mr. Trump "because he embodies the empty promise of managerial leadership outside of politics." Steven Hayward, likewise, faults Mr. Trump's "inclination to understand our problems as being managerial rather than political." I've written before about "the two words that explain Trump's appeal." This distinction between the managerial and the political seems to me to be something of a false dichotomy, whether made by Mr. Trump or by the conservative intellectuals.

In fact some of the most successful Republican officeholders in recent years — Mayor Giuliani, Mitch Daniels, Stephen Goldsmith — have embraced managerial excellence. It is nothing to turn up one's nose at. The most popular governor in the country, Charles Baker, Republican of Massachusetts, spoke last week about, "the blocking and tackling of government. ...focusing on what works and what doesn't, and doing more of the former and less of the latter, we mean that too...Every day the people expect their state government to work. They work hard. They have to sweat the details, and they have to perform. So should we."

Mitch Daniels, then governor of Indiana, talked about similar things a few years ago in an important speech at the Manhattan Institute. "We do want a government that earns and keeps the confidence of the American people," Mr. Daniels said, quoting Hamilton's Federalist No. 1: "the vigor of government is essential to the security of liberty... a dangerous ambition more often lurks behind the specious mask of zeal for the rights of the people than under the forbidden appearance of zeal for the firmness and efficiency of government."

Also notable among the tens of thousands of words and dozens of pages in National Review was what was absent. Nothing from Conrad Black, the National Review contributor who has probably known Mr. Trump longest and best, and who has been vouching for him. No mention of Carl Icahn, the widely respected investor, businessman, and charter school operator who supports Mr. Trump.

In all the pages of reasons to supposedly oppose Mr. Trump, oddly missing from the kitchen sink list was his debate statement in support of the idea that vaccines cause autism, a claim with no scientific basis. I don't expect that I will be voting for Mr. Trump. But as much as he makes me cringe, so too does National Review's treatment of him. In its own illogical, inconsistent, ad hominem attacks, perhaps National Review is precisely the foe Mr. Trump deserves.