

POLITICO

National Review aims to take down Trump

The influential magazine turns to conservative leaders to make the anti-Trump case

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For months, Republican leaders have worried about how to stop 2016 frontrunner Donald Trump. Now, one of the conservative movement's most influential publications is taking matters into its own hands.

National Review is dedicating a special issue of its magazine, one week before the Iowa caucuses, to stopping Trump. "Against Trump," blares the magazine cover. Inside, a blistering editorial questions Trump's commitment to conservatism, warning voters that backing him is tantamount to allowing the conservative movement to have "fallen in behind a huckster."

"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 reads.

And that's just the start.

The National Review issue features anti-Trump essays from more than 20 conservative thinkers, leaders and commentators spanning the GOP's ideological spectrum from David Boaz, executive vice president of the libertarian-infused Cato Institute, to William Kristol, the hawkish editor of the Weekly Standard, to David McIntosh, president of the Club for Growth. All call for Republicans to nominate someone other than Trump.

"This is the time to mobilize," said National Review editor Rich Lowry, who is also a weekly opinion columnist at POLITICO. "The establishment is AWOL, or even worse, so it's up to people who really believe in these ideas and principles, for whom they're not just talking points or positions of convenience, to set out the marker."

Although Trump has dominated national presidential polls since last summer, he has been subjected to relatively minor attacks on the airwaves. Instead, the more traditional candidates have turned into a circular firing squad shooting at each other, especially anyone who emerges as a possible top Trump alternative. The campaigns and super PACs supporting Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, Jeb Bush and Chris Christie have aired millions in ads slamming one another. (The super PAC supporting John Kasich has been the notable exception in targeting Trump.)

With Cruz clinging to a narrow lead in Iowa, and Trump leading everywhere else, the question of who to choose between the two has convulsed through Republican circles in recent days and weeks.

Some leading GOP voices, most notably Bob Dole, have argued that Trump is a deal-maker with whom establishment Republicans could actually work, unlike Cruz. Former GOP Senate leader Trent Lott said he'd take Trump over Cruz, too. And longtime Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad has announced his opposition to Cruz, though he has not backed Trump.

The idea of choosing between Cruz and Trump, though, has soured many Republicans. "It's like being shot or poisoned," Sen. Lindsey Graham, who recently dropped out of the presidential race and endorsed Bush, said on Capitol Hill Thursday. "What does it really matter?"

For movement conservatives, Lowry said, the choice is clear: Anybody but Trump.

"We've spent our lifetimes opposing poll-driven Republicans, and here's a guy who's the single most poll-obsessed politician in the history of the United States, judging by what he says," Lowry said. "And we're going to put him in the White House and expect him to stand by anything he's said? It's an insane gamble."

Lowry was slated to go on Megyn Kelly's Fox News program Thursday night to promote the anti-Trump package. National Review plans to begin posting the essays and editorial, which were provided in advance to POLITICO, on Friday.

While National Review ran an anti-Newt Gingrich cover and editorial in 2012, Lowry said, "I don't think we've ever done something like this," summoning a cross-section of conservative leaders to try to dislodge a GOP frontrunner.

Among those penning anti-Trump pieces are the faces and voices of other top conservative outlets, including Kristol, Ben Domenech, publisher of the Federalist, Erick Erickson, former editor of RedState.com, Yuval Levin, editor of National Affairs, and John Podhoretz, editor of Commentary. Syndicated USA Today columnist Cal Thomas writes an anti-Trump essay, and so does Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"Trump has a lot of support from very conservative voters and to the extent we can convince any number of those people to leave Trump, that could be decisive," Lowry said.

The editorial is not without risk for National Review, which is scheduled to co-sponsor a Republican presidential debate in February with CNN. After the New Hampshire Union-Leader wrote a scathing, anti-Trump editorial, the paper was removed as a debate sponsor. Trump took credit for its removal.

"We'll let the chips fall where they may on that one," Lowry said of the upcoming debate.