

## Inside the ‘Against Trump’ Issue

**Why the National Review decided to launch a full broadside against The Donald—and what the blowback has been.**

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Right after *The Kelly File* did a segment on *National Review's* anti-Trump issue Thursday night and we released it online, it was just a matter of waiting for the reaction. It didn't take long.

The issue, bluntly titled “Against Trump” and with a cover designed to invoke Trumpian garishness, has elicited huzzahs of support and howls of outrage, spontaneous donations from grateful readers and countless hateful denunciations on Twitter. Just another day in a Republican primary that feels like a low-simmering civil war.

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We'd conceived of the issue about a month ago. It was beginning to get to crunch time in the primary season and we wanted to make a big statement, as well as push back against the lazy notion that it's only "the establishment" that opposes Trump. We began to muster conservatives across the spectrum to make the case against him.

This was around the holidays and, as I learned, that's not a very good time to try to organize people, nor does it make you popular with your family. We picked up again in earnest about two weeks ago.

We wanted to get 15-20 people to participate—space is limited in the print edition—and ended up with about two dozen. (The last couple of days I've been getting emails from conservatives saying, "If only I had known, I would have loved to contribute.")

We worked to keep the group intellectually diverse. In fact, many of these contributors have harshly criticized one another—and National Review—in the past. We got a strong representative of the religious right—Russell Moore of the Southern Baptist Convention—and a dyed-in-the-wool libertarian, David Boaz of the Cato Institute. We pulled together popular voices from the Tea Party right, like Glenn Beck, Dana Loesch and Erick Erickson, who combine their powerful journalism with activism, along with editors of long-standing conservative magazines, like John Podhoretz of *Commentary*, R.R. Reno of *First Things* and Bill Kristol of the *Weekly Standard*. We balanced a Reagan hand present at the creation—former Reagan attorney general Ed Meese—with 27-year-old Katie Pavlich of *Townhall*.

Our basic argument about Trump is simple and unassailable: He is a populist, not a conservative. Conservatism has always had a populist element, but it has been tethered to conservatism's animating causes of liberty, limited government and the Constitution. Trump inveighs against elites and tramples on political pieties, but these causes are afterthoughts to him, at best.

We knew the issue would get a reaction, yet even we have been surprised at the attention it has received and the debate it has engendered. On Friday, the cover was plastered all over cable news. And of course it was inevitable that as soon as the issue was posted, Trump—per usual—called us losers on Twitter.

Trump insists that *National Review* doesn't matter and acts as if he has barely heard of us, but at the same time he spends an inordinate amount of time responding to what we and our writers say. It was particularly rich that Trump invoked William F. Buckley Jr. in one of his tweets, apparently unaware that Buckley hated crude populism and had called Trump a "narcissist" and "demagogue" back in 2000. Nothing has changed in the ensuing 15 years.

A couple of themes have been prominent in the pro-Trump pushback against our issue:

*Who are you to tell us what to think?* Well, we're an opinion magazine. People are free to agree or disagree, admire us or detest us. If people find that uncongenial, there are all sorts of place they can move in the world where they won't be disturbed by robust argument about politics.

*Won't your criticism just help Trump?* It's possible. But we aren't a super PAC or a political campaign. Our role is to call it as we see it, and let the chips fall where they may. It has happened before that candidates we opposed won the Republican nomination (see Bob Dole in 1996 or John McCain in 2008), and it may well happen again this year.

*You are the dastardly establishment.* If Brent Bozell, Dana Loesch, Katie Pavlich and Erick Erickson are the establishment, the world really has been turned upside down. In reality, elements of the Republican establishment are currently negotiating the terms of their surrender to Trump before a vote has been cast, in an astonishing display of fecklessness.

*How dare you criticize someone so dominant in the polls?* I really don't get this one. If Trump were running second everywhere, it would be less important to criticize him. Even Trump understands this: As he explained in the last debate, he only began attacking Ted Cruz when he started rising in the polls. This line of argument is a form of fatalism: Trump is at about 35 percent in the national polls, therefore the race is over. Nicolle Wallace actually said on MSNBC on Friday, "The voters have now spoken." Before any caucus or primary! There is no doubt that Trump is in a strong position, but that obviously shouldn't exempt him from criticism, especially when he himself is a one-man political wrecking ball.

*You just don't get Trump's appeal.* Actually, we have written extensively about Trump's appeal—from his emphasis on immigration to his resistance to political correctness—and believe his candidacy holds important lessons for the GOP. You can learn from him without nominating him.

Amid all the criticism, we have gotten an outpouring of support from conservatives who believe this needed to be said and are grateful that we said it. Several hundred readers have sent

donations because they understand that this is what National Review exists to do—to plant the flag for conservatism, without fear or favor, even if it drives a certain real estate mogul and his acolytes crazy.