



National Review's Sad Surrender to Trump

A year ago, the magazine proudly declared that it was "Against Trump." Now it's defending the president against his many critics. What gives?

Jeet Heer

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As a magazine of ideas, *National Review* has always been torn between deciding whether its primary loyalty was to conservative ideology or the Republican Party, a tension that has grown more acute in the age of Trump. A year ago, during the Republican primary, the magazine released its heralded "Against Trump" issue, a powerful statement that even though the candidate was immensely popular with Republican voters, he had to be resisted. "Trump is a philosophically unmoored political opportunist," the editors wrote, "who would trash the broad conservative ideological consensus within the GOP in favor of a free-floating populism with strong-man overtones." But this stance was always on shaky ground, containing contrary positions that were subject to being falsified by events.

Two major motivations for the Never Trump movement were that few thought he could win a general election—and thus, there was no risk in taking a moral stand against him—and that he was so ideologically unreliable, he might govern as a liberal. Well, Trump won the election and all his early appointments and executive orders point to him governing well to the right of any Republican since Herbert Hoover, if not further. So what happens to Never Trump now that such core arguments have been rendered irrelevant? As *National Review*'s recent output shows, Never Trump is giving way to a grudging anti-anti-Trump—of not quite giving full support to Trump, but spending more time challenging his liberal foes than the president himself.

This can be seen most clearly on the immigration issue. "Against Trump" contained a symposium, "Conservatives against Trump," in which several writers made an eloquent case that Trump's proposed ban on Muslim immigration was a violation of fundamental American values. "Trump launched his campaign talking about Mexican rapists and has gone on to rant about mass deportation, bans on Muslim immigration, shutting down mosques, and building a wall around America," wrote David Boaz of the Cato Institute. "America is an exceptional nation in large part because we've aspired to rise above such prejudices and guarantee life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to everyone." Southern Baptist luminary Russell Moore

argued, “Trump’s willingness to ban Muslims, even temporarily, from entering the country simply because of their religious affiliation would make Jefferson spin in his grave.”

But something strange has happened now that Trump has issued an executive order temporarily blocking immigrants from seven predominantly Muslim countries—the first step towards a Muslim ban. *National Review* kind of likes what Trump wants to do, though they might have doubts about the execution. They also know what they don’t like: Liberals criticizing a Republican president. Driven by this partisan logic, they’ve adopted a stance of anti-anti-Trump. They aren’t whole-hearted supporters of the president, but they’re closer to him than to his critics.

“To read the online commentary, one would think that President Trump just fundamentally corrupted the American character,” David French, a staff writer who flirted a third-party challenge in last year’s election, lamented. “You would think that the executive order on refugees he signed yesterday betrayed America’s Founding ideals. You might even think he banned people from an entire faith from American shores.” French argued that “Trump’s order isn’t a betrayal of American values,” but rather is well within the historical norm, and that any innovations were rational solutions to real security problems.

In a Sunday editorial, “Trump’s Order on Refugees: Mostly Right on Substance, Wrong on Rollout,” the editors made a similar argument—that “reasonable policy has been drowned in outrage.” The Los Angeles-based lawyer Dan McLaughlin pushed this argument further, saying that Trump’s policy was flawed by not going far enough. McLaughlin fancifully suggested that rather than just banning Syrian refugees, they should be turned into a military force. “My own preference for Syrian refugees, many of them military-age males whom Assad is trying to get out of his country, has been to arm them, train them, and send them back, after the tradition of the Polish and French in World War II and the Czechs in World War I,” he fantasized.

It goes on. *National Review* editor Rich Lowry wrote that “it is not true that a months long pause in immigration from seven Muslim-majorities countries, some of which lack functioning governments, and all of which are either war-torn or hostile to the United States, is a violation of the nation’s creed.” And whereas French argued that “you can read the entire executive order from start to finish, reread it, then read it again, and you *will not* find a Muslim ban,” contributing editor Andrew C. McCarthy apparently disagreed: “[W]e should not hide under our beds in shame every time an Islamist, a Democrat, or a media talking-head spews: ‘Muslim ban!’ Of course we’re banning Muslims. We’re moving to an exclusion of radical Islam, and radical Islam is exclusively made up of Muslims.”

National Review was so disgusted by candidate Trump as to devote an entire magazine issue against him. “Some conservatives have made it their business to make excuses for Trump and duly get pats on the head from him,” the editors wrote a year ago. “Count us out.” But President Trump is now doing exactly what candidate Trump promised, and *National Review* is making excuses for him. What gives?

Forfeiting the ideals of Never Trump, *National Review* is starting to embrace, slowly and awkwardly, the Republican president out of fealty to the party. This was perhaps an inevitable

development. The magazine was born in 1955 as a revolt against the moderate Republicanism of Dwight Eisenhower. When the conservative movement inspired by *National Review* took over the GOP, the magazine became intimately linked with the party, and started having trouble criticizing Republican administrations. As John Judis showed in his biography of William F. Buckley, the *National Review* founder began to forgive conservative politicians like Ronald Reagan who strayed from right-wing orthodoxy in order to win elections. The balancing act Buckley learned to perform, of being both a supporter of the party and a keeper of ideological purity, tilted increasingly in the direction of partisanship.

That's the same dilemma that *National Review* confronts today. Trump is not a conservative, but he does many things that the right likes—and above all, he's a Republican. In some ways, *National Review* is following the trajectory of the party as a whole: Initially doubtful of Trump, but eventually consolidating behind him as the leader of the GOP. Never Trump is increasingly losing any salience as a real political position. While anti-anti-Trump is the current holding position, there's ample reason to suspect that for many *National Review* writers, it'll become something more full-throated: Forever Trump.