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## **In 2016, Did Donald Trump Banish Principles from Politics?**

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I ended my overview of the **self-destruction of the Democratic Party** with a warning about how the Republicans can blow it all by forgetting what they are supposed to stand for. This is the danger presented by this year's top political story, the rise to power of Donald Trump, a man who has no coherent ideology and does not stand for any political principles.

To clarify, a slogan like "America First" is not a principle. It's a *motive*. A principle would be a universal rule describing why America comes first, what America means and stands for, and how to protect and support those things.

A principle is: "to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just power from the consent of the governed." Or: "The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people." Or in a contemporary political context, a principle would include the things you usually hear from Republican politicians about the need for "small government" and "free markets." But Trump never talks in those terms. It is a language that is foreign to him. He doesn't even have consistent policy proposals, except for **trade war**.

It might seem a little naive to complain about a politician being unprincipled. It's definitely a "Dog Bites Man" story. For example, there's Ted Cruz, who refused to explicitly endorse Trump because of something about voting your conscience, then went ahead and **endorsed Trump anyway** once he started to get a little worried about his own re-election.

Yet Trump is unprincipled in a way that is different from that. He is openly, brazenly unprincipled, without bothering over any pretense. And that makes a difference.

Oscar Wilde famously said that hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue. Even when the hypocrite fails to live up to his morals, he still affirms the validity of morality itself by acknowledging that he is *supposed* to be living up to them. It's an old dilemma. What's worse: someone who professes high standards but falls short of them, or someone who has no standards at all?

Yes, most politicians are pragmatic and opportunistic when push comes to shove. But they at least pay political principles the tribute of claiming to have some regard for them. Trump doesn't do this, and the danger is that this mindset will spread to the rest of the Republican Party. I've written a lot about this issue over the past year, so I'll just quote my "**ultimate argument for #NeverTrump.**"

For years, I've been very sympathetic to the idea of identifying myself as an advocate of limited government but not as "a Republican," as a way of emphasizing that my loyalty is to ideas and not to a political party. But I'm starting to think we won't realize how much we're going to miss the Republican Party until it is gone. We've taken for granted that there will always be a party which, however imperfectly it lives up to its ideals, still regards the preservation of liberty and the Constitution as an indispensable part of its agenda and its very identity.

As such, the Republican Party has actually been a central institution in the preservation of our liberty. We always need to have at least one major party that takes this as its mission. Without that, the Republic is doomed, because there will be no major political faction that views the defense of our system as part of its basic mandate. And if that happens, politics just becomes a raw scramble for power, with each party looking to loot the country on behalf of its base of supporters. Which is precisely what Trumpism amounts to.

The unique danger of Trump is that he is not just unprincipled but opposed to principles, an attitude he has **unleashed among his supporters.**

[A] stubborn dedication to principles is now suddenly regarded as a "whining" and as a sign of weakness. "Your conscience isn't on the ballot," they tell us.

Or better yet, the same religious conservatives who used to talk about the importance of character and worry about the "coarsening of the culture" (remember that one?), or rail against Bill Clinton for being a womanizer and serial adulterer—those people now tell us that reluctance to back Trump is because of "rigid moralism" and "moral narcissism." It's even a form of "civil cowardice" because we're too weak to sully ourselves with the morally ambiguous work that needs to be done. We want to have "clean hands," so we refuse to recognize the alleged necessity in this ugly business of politics of being willing to get "dirty hands right up to the elbows."...

How is this consistent with the moralizing past of the religious right? Oh, I see it, "Christian moral thinking ranks concrete responsibility ahead of rigid rule-following." Or as a Trump supporter put it in a comment on the Breitbart article I linked to above: "There are no individual ethics when the country is at stake."

A whole wing of the right has suddenly turned into Jim Taggart: we can't afford principles at a time like this.

(This is one of the reasons the Trump phenomenon has emboldened the racist alt-right, who recognize that "Politics without abstract, universal principles is just tribal warfare," which is what they want it to become.)

Trump has exploited the latent anti-intellectualism implicit in decades of Republican **cultural populism**.

In a healthy movement, the emotional, populist element is balanced by an intellectual and ideological element, and normal politicians try to appeal to both. They give stirring stump speeches about how dad was a bartender or about how they're going to abolish the IRS (Rubio and Cruz, respectively), then they go give detailed policy speeches at the Heritage Foundation. What's disturbing about Trump is that he ignores that second part and says, in effect: I'm going to win without ever having to explain anything in a way that makes any sense. He is ignoring and disparaging the vote of the thinking man....

[Fifty] years of saying "we're for the regular guy against those crazy intellectuals" has undermined the ability of intellectuals on the right to expose a flim-flam artist like Trump—or to get anyone to listen to them when they do. We've pandered too much to the populist desire to tell all those damned intellectuals to stuff it.

The Republican Party is **not Trump's party**, at least not yet, as witnessed by all of the more traditional GOP politicians like Paul Ryan who cruised to re-election this year, all of them by much wider margins than Trump.

But notice the influence Trump has already had, for example, in transforming **Republicans' views on Russia**. A general election victory, however narrow, changes things. Trump knows all too well how people love to align themselves with a "winner."

So far, before he even takes office, there are a lot of signs that Trump will govern the way he campaigned. There was his thin-skinned reaction to the actors from the "Hamilton" musical, when he had to be **reminded** by Mike Pence that citizens speaking up to their political leaders is "what freedom sounds like."

There was his personal intervention to keep a Carrier factory from moving to Mexico, which involved a kind of influence-peddling that smacks of the **same swamp of cronyism** he was supposedly going to drain.

A New York investment banker sums up the situation: "If we step back and I'm looking at earnings of \$6.60 per share this year, 2 cents is an easy concession if the president-elect listens to some of the company's bigger concerns." Or, as a trade expert puts it, "Goodwill is an asset. Companies all the time want to build goodwill with their governments."

I call that a form of pay-to-play. And that brings us back to Donald Trump's promise to drain the swamp. It was ridiculous from the beginning, of course. Donald Trump is a swamp creature if ever there was one. So all he has done is to change the swamp. Rather than horse-trading to provide special favors to one group of cronies, we're going to have horse-trading to provide special favors to another group of cronies. The difference is that the president himself, who fancies himself a master dealmaker, will be openly at the center of the favor-trading.

Worse than that is the way Trump is already getting Republicans to endorse his opposition to free markets, as in **this scene** with Pence.

“‘This is the way it’s going to be,’ Mr. Trump said.... ‘Corporate America is going to have to understand that we have to take care of our workers also.... I don’t want them moving out of the country without consequences,’ Mr. Trump said, even if that means angering the free-market-oriented Republicans he beat in the primaries but will have to work with on Capitol Hill. ‘The free market has been sorting it out and America’s been losing,’ Mr. Pence added, as Mr. Trump interjected, ‘Every time, every time.’”

Get that last part? The message is not just, as some have put it, that “the free market has failed.” Trump’s message is that the free market fails every time.

Some of these worries have been mitigated by Trump’s cabinet appointments, which include choices I really like and even some businessmen who are **influenced by Ayn Rand**—the ultimate source for principled advocacy of the free market. So does this mean the actual Trump administration will be much better than we fear? **Maybe so, maybe not.**

Personnel is policy, but within limits.

After all, the “personnel” with the ultimate decision-making power is the president.... More important, there’s the worry that good personnel is just window-dressing for bad policy. Good people are brought in because their reputation provides cover for an administration that’s actually moving the other direction. And the good people sometimes knuckle under and provide “the sanction of the victim” rather than risk losing their top-level jobs. History shows that it’s really easy to talk yourself into supporting a bad administration in the vain hope of still somehow using your “influence” for good.

In President Obama’s cabinet, consider the case of Samantha Power, who made her name by arguing for international humanitarian intervention to prevent genocide. She ended up, as ambassador to the United Nations, managing Obama’s do-nothing policy toward the humanitarian disaster in Syria.

In the current context, I pointed to the cautionary tale of Stephen Moore, who in search of influence in the Trump administration went from principled free-marketer to economic populist with surprising agility.

While all this was happening, where was the “party of principle,” the Libertarian Party? **Pandering to the muddled center.** Unsuccessfully.

Yet there was one big example this year of a group of people standing on principle: **theline in the sand** drawn by the #NeverTrump conservative intellectuals.

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. All of these are powerful and important appeals to the importance of principles. And they were widely criticized or ignored. The #NeverTrump symposium was published in January. At the time, I concluded:

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.

Well, heck.

It turns out the American people are a lot like their politicians. They talk about how they want leaders who will act on principle, but when push comes to shove, they really don't. They want politicians and pundits who will pander to them—and only to them, or to people like them. That, plus they want someone who will promise a win for their tribe and promise to smack down the people they don't like. That's what they were offered this year, and that's what they got.

We're about to conduct a bold national experiment to see whether we can solve all of the nation's problems without using any abstract ideas. I think you can guess how well that's likely to end up. We'll see the actual result soon enough, and that will be one of the top stories to follow in 2017.