

The American Conservative

Donald Trump Is More Like Ike Than George W. Bush

Why movement conservatives hate the GOP frontrunner.

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National Review's barrage against Donald Trump won't make much difference in the race, but clarifies nonetheless. In an editorial and 22 signed contributions, the magazine urges conservatives to reject Trump. Ninety percent of those likely to be influenced by *National Review* (a small, but not negligible number in a GOP primary) would have come to that conclusion without any help: Trump is not and never has been an establishment conservative, and other perfectly capable candidates are filling that niche. Nonetheless, *NR's* "Against Trump" campaign reveals much about the magazine and the current state of the conservative movement.

National Review has a history, and not entirely a dismal one, of efforts to exclude people from the ranks of respectable conservatism. In the 1950s, it hardly helped conservatism of any stripe to have the John Birch Society proclaiming that Eisenhower and his brother were witting communist agents: it simply made the Right seem kooky and stupid. Buckley's dismissal of the group was prudent. But subsequent purges targeted not kooks, but ideological opponents, especially after the end of the Cold War. Twenty years ago *National Review* sought to damage Pat Buchanan's presidential bid by publishing various polemics and jointly signed statements against him. Buchanan was vulnerable because part of his appeal was as a loyal Republican who had spent many years at Nixon's and Reagan's side, before he began to challenge the GOP consensus.

In Buchanan's case, the actual reasons for opposing him were seldom the stated ones. His greatest sin against the establishment right was that he opposed the first Iraq war, and made an enemy of the neoconservatives who had become an increasingly dominant part of the conservative coalition. Seven years later, *NR* struck again, with a [2003 cover story](#) denouncing as "unpatriotic" those conservatives who were trying to warn against the folly of the second Iraq war. The attack, published under magazine's current editor Rich Lowry, was hardly damaging to the individuals targeted, but did reveal that support for wars in the Mideast had become the only true litmus test for the establishment Right.

NR's Trump attacks cover the spectrum: Trump is both too much to the left, and too much to the right. Trump is a two bit Caesar, he is racist, he is liberal, he once supported abortion, he supported the TARP bailouts, he is not a real conservative. In so many words, he is not one of us.

But of course anyone giving Trump a look knew that already. His differences from establishment conservatism are part of his appeal. To understand that, it helps to consider what “really existing conservatism” has meant to Americans over the past generation. The blunt truth is that the most important “conservative” project in recent memory was the Iraq war, which cost trillions, wrecked the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans and set the Middle East aflame for what will probably be a generation. Programmatically, the war was the project of a Republican president and his administration. It was backed enthusiastically by *National Review* (see “Unpatriotic Conservatives,” linked above), but had its intellectual origins in the world of neoconservatism. Not coincidentally, Bill Kristol and John Podhoretz, editors of magazines which were agitating for war against Iraq long before 9/11, are probably the best known among *NR*'s slate of Trump denouncers. In other words, as the United States still grapples with the chaotic aftermath of that Iraq invasion, *NR* and the rest of Conservatism Inc. unleash a verbal torrent claiming that Donald Trump is a threat to those concepts—“small government,” “the permanent things”—which true conservatives supposedly hold dear. It's almost comical.

But in ways realms different from those considered by *National Review* and the Beltway right-wingers, Donald Trump is a kind of conservative. In his speeches, he has tried to fill out his “Make America Great Again” slogan with some notion of what kind of society he is trying to conserve, or restore. He has talked—not very politely, but probably in the only way possible to get people to listen—about ending illegal immigration and limiting legal immigration. This is of course critical if the United States is to remain the country which it has always been, one with relatively open spaces and relatively high wages. He speaks about stopping the hemorrhage of American manufacturing jobs to China and elsewhere. Would he succeed? It's not clear—it would certainly be difficult. But nations before have tried, and succeeded, to protect their manufacturers, and the jobs and relative social stability that go along with them. For *National Review* however, such policies simply are not “conservative”—and the editors mock Trump for his “threats to retaliate against companies that do too much manufacturing overseas for his taste.”

The society that Trump has in mind when he speaks of restoring America's greatness is probably something like the America of the Eisenhower administration. Ike was reelected by a landslide when Donald J. Trump was ten years old. He carried New York state by 22 percent. Of course Eisenhower isn't any sort of model for most in the conservative movement. The *National Review* of William F. Buckley's era thought Ike's administration stultifying. Conservative intellectuals railed against Ike's readiness to accommodate itself to New Deal social legislation and his refusal to risk war by trying to liberate Eastern Europe. Eisenhower's rule convinced Buckley's friend Whittaker Chambers, for one, that capitalism was the losing side.

But a certain style of main street conservatism did thrive during the Eisenhower era. It was not revolutionary, did not look towards unleashing “democratic revolutions” in distant regions, or unraveling the regulatory chains on finance capitalism. It was devoted to bettering the lives of average Americans and practicing a strategy of containment in the Cold War. Public

infrastructure was built. Industry expanded, wages grew. Married couples raised big families. Illegal aliens were deported. It was not the conservatism of the Kristols or Podhoretzes—Ike didn't start any big wars in the Mideast or elsewhere and indeed backed the UN consensus by forcing Israel to cough up its 1956 conquests in the Sinai. Nor of the Cato Institute—taxes on the rich were high, and the government spent a lot of money on public works useful to all.

For most Americans, this was a good thing—society was basically stable, supposedly a conservative virtue. Trump certainly holds no briefs for the residual segregation of that era: if press accounts are to be believed, his taste for glamor and celebrity have led him to a more racially diverse personal life than any other candidate running. But there are plenty of signs he aspires to be a sort of Eisenhower for his time, more solicitous of middle America than of Wall Street, more concerned about American living standards than an ambitious ideological remake of the world. Asked at a New Hampshire town hall about how he would “restore stability” to the Mideast after defeating ISIS, he demurred. “Our bridges, our infrastructure are falling apart,” he answered.

It is likely that this take-care-of-Americans-first attitude is the true source of *National Review's* hostility to Trump. Chris Matthews raised this point in a [provocative interview on Hardball](#): what they really hate about Trump is not his bombast, but his opposition to the Iraq war, and the idea that he would take the Republican Party off the militaristic intervention track. That he would, in other words, take the GOP back to Eisenhower's time. Matthews recalled from experience (not his own) that coordinated multi-signature attack is a tell-tale neocon tactic, used to try to push George W. Bush into making war against Iraq, before that used to depict Pat Buchanan as beyond the pale.

This is not to say that there are not legitimate questions about Trump's temperament, his ability to function as America's chief executive, or his suitability as any kind of personal role model to the nation. There are. Valid points are raised by some of the *National Review* contributors. Many others—including people fairly well disposed towards Trump's candidacy—are asking them as well. But perhaps members of the “mainstream establishment conservatism” as represented by *National Review* are not the best people to raise them.