



The NeverTrump Dilemma

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After “CBS Evening News” anchor Walter Cronkite said he no longer trusted America’s leaders regarding the Vietnam War, President Lyndon Johnson supposedly remarked, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America.” A month later, on March 31, 1968, Johnson stunned the nation by dropping his re-election bid.

So should President Trump and the Republican Party fret because they have now lost columnist George Will? Not really—and that is the sad truth Will and other NeverTrump Republicans must face.

The GOP nominated Trump because he represents the views of a majority of the party’s voters. His views on immigration have at times been bluntly and offensively expressed, but polls have shown for years that nearly half of the GOP’s general election voters want to deport illegal immigrants. Will is upset by Trump’s tariffs, which he called his “border folly,” but clear majorities of Republican 2016 primary voters thought international trade cost America jobs. The so-called “Muslim ban” that has so outraged some NeverTrumpers? Analysis of the primary and general elections show it was the single most important reason Trump won both races.

The same holds true for other issues motivating other prominent NeverTrump figures to break ranks with the GOP. Some are furious over the President’s now-rescinded policy of separating children from parents who seek asylum at the border, but polls showed that Republicans supported it by a wide margin. Prominent evangelical conservative writers frequently criticize their co-religionists’ embrace of Trump, but most evangelical voters think their position is too tenuous to question a deal for judges and policy with a man whose ethics they may privately deplore. A plurality of Republicans also think NATO helps our allies more than it helps the United States, a 2016 Pew poll found. Trump’s calls for our NATO allies to spend more or else risk American disengagement is anathema to prominent NeverTrumpers who write about national security, but such demands reflect the views of a very large number of Republican voters.

Painful Choices Ahead NeverTrump Republicans must confront the fact that on issue after issue they are in the minority within their own party. For years, more globally minded and free-market-favorable Republicans have dominated a party whose voters cared more about culture than tax cuts, and often wanted the exact opposite of what party elites and leaders did. They may

not all love Trump, but they believe he is on their side—and so far he has not let them down. That leaves NeverTrump Republicans with a set of very painful choices. They cannot retake their party without accommodating the views of voters who they so far have denounced from their pulpits. But they are not strong enough to beat the pro-Trump coalition on their own, nor are they numerous enough to win with a new party, as Juleanna Glover suggested in the New York Times earlier this year. To win without Trump backers, they would need either permanently to join the Democrats, strengthening the moderate Left in their perennial battle with progressives for party control, or join independents and dissident center-left Democrats to form a new, aggressively centrist third party. Either course would require compromise on issues that many have championed for the majority of their adult lives. This doesn't mean that Trump backers should gleefully wave these people goodbye. They may be a distinct minority within the GOP, but they still represent a significant share of voters, people the Trump coalition needs to become a truly dominant force. Data from the Voter Study Group shows that about 6 percent of Mitt Romney's voters in 2012 either voted for a third-party candidate (mainly Libertarian Gary Johnson or independent Evan McMullin) or a write-in. Six percent of Romney's vote is about 3 million people and nearly 3 percent of the entire electorate. Should they follow Will's lead, GOP control of Congress would be impossible, and Trump's own re-election would be endangered. Voter Study Group data points to another source of potential discord, free-market conservatives who reluctantly voted for Trump.

According to Cato's Emily Ekins, about one-quarter of Trump's support came from "Free-Marketeers," a group of generally loyal Republicans who have more liberal views about immigration and more positive views towards trade than Trump loyalists. About half of them voted for Trump more as a vote against

Clinton than as a vote for him. That's 12 percent of Trump's vote—7.5 million people, representing about 6 percent of the total electorate—whose loyalties are split between a party whose ideals they support and a president whom they distrust and whose policies they sometimes oppose. Lose this group and both GOP and Trump defeat is certain. When It Is Necessary to Change I understand why many in this group find Trump and some of his policies distasteful. I also understand why they are reluctant to give up the old notion that they can dominate the Republican Party. As Ronald Reagan said in 1964, "human nature resists change and it goes over backward to avoid radical change." But another conservative, Russell Kirk, perhaps summed up the current situation well in this aphorism: "The definition of conservatism is that when it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change." Both political necessity and the good of the body politic seem to require change, and it would behoove

NeverTrump Republicans to see that sooner rather than later. Should that happen, Trump backers should welcome them back into the fold with open arms— and a willingness to compromise to keep them there. That's what Reagan did in his many campaigns: accept that he needed support from Republicans and others who didn't share all of his beliefs but who shared enough of them that they could work together. As Churchill said, "in Victory, Magnanimity." But there are limits. Reagan concluded his 1964 advice to conservatives mourning Barry Goldwater's defeat with these words: "I don't think we should turn the high command over to leaders who were traitors in the battle just ended." NeverTrump Republicans who want to join the other side now should be prepared to do serious penance should they ever change their minds.