



Conservatives must keep their eyes on the prize

By Richard Esenberg

Conservatives are still fighting the battle of **#NeverTrump**. I'd like to suggest a truce.

On the one hand, some of us believe that Donald Trump's 2016 nomination and eventual victory require a process of confession and reconciliation. Conservatives, in this view, have been corrupted by tribalism and an unwillingness to leave a cognitive bubble that prevented them from seeing

Trump for what he was. The cost was an abandonment of principle to personality. These conservatives worry that, in defending Trump's every tweet and in conforming to the twists and turns of his policy portfolio, we are doubling down on a losing hand.

I'm not entirely unsympathetic. Putting aside his personal foibles, candidate Trump presented himself, in many respects, as the antithesis of the freedom movement's

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core beliefs. Making peace with him ought to have been an uneasy and tentative thing. Conservatives who supported Trump with less reservation ought to have understood that. They should not be blind to the dangers to conservatism presented by his presidency.

But others believe that the opportunities presented by a president who is at least open — and sometimes committed — to conservative reform should not be squandered. I was a vociferous anti-Trumper but eventually came to believe that a vote for him offered a chance at avoiding — or at least slowing — the movement to post-constitutionalism and a permanent politics of grievance and cronyism that certainly would have accompanied a Hillary Clinton presidency.

In my judgment, this chance justified what I freely acknowledge to be the serious downside risk — for both conservatives and the nation — of a President Trump. People like me acted on principle in spite of personality.

What comes next?

This ought to point to the path forward. This is not the time for conservatives to argue about whether people like me were right but to do what we can to make us right. That requires keeping our eyes on the prize.

The point of politics is not to aggrandize individuals. I don't support Republicans out of a rooting interest or as a matter of partisan identity. I do it because I believe that it is generally the best way to advance the ideas that I believe in and that I hope will make my country a better place to live. The GOP is not the end; it is a means.

If that is so, our support for this president — or, for that matter, any other — will always be tentative and conditional. We did not elect him to honor the House of Trump but to move the country in a particular way. We need to applaud what he does right and criticize what he does wrong. Our support needs to be coupled with our advice. Trump needs to be shown the right thing to do.

Let me suggest a few things to keep in mind:

Get the rules right. Gov. Scott Walker made a great beginning in his letter urging the then-president-elect to restore competitive federalism and right the imbalance of power between the federal government and the states. Now

that Republicans control the federal government, our task ought to be not to weaponize it but to tame it. We should resist the temptation to use Washington to dictate policies in the states.

In addition to restoring the limits on federal power, we should rein in the administrative state and restore the balance of power in Washington itself. Having a Republican president should be the occasion for restoring the prerogatives and duties of Congress. It ought not simply be an occasion for making law through executive orders we like.

Freedom still matters. Trump's success made us aware of the frustrations of the middle class, who have not been

well-served by Democrats' identity politics. We cannot simply assume that lower taxes will cure all ills. But we need to make sure that our response is not a return to the failed policies of Keynesian economics and shortsighted protectionism. Browbeating businesses and picking winners and losers are just as wrong when Republicans do so as when Democrats are the offenders. We should spend money on infrastructure only if we need

infrastructure and not as a jobs program. It remains the difficult task of conservatives to be honest about the limitations of government.

We need to ensure that regulation and taxes do not distort markets and initiative while making sure that government interventions respect choice and use the power of markets.

The facts — and civility — count. In all of this, we need to avoid the temptation to confuse a lack of rigor about the facts and respect for civility as wisdom or explain it away as “three-dimensional chess.” We need to understand that belligerence is not synonymous with strength and nuance is not weakness.

Conservatism — or at least its freedom wing — has never been a populist movement. We need to be willing to make common cause with the Trump administration when we can. But we should never be seduced by it.

The election is over. The real work now begins. [WI](#)



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