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William Voegeli: Joe Biden • Angelo M. Codevilla: Michael Anton’s The Stakes
Victor Davis Hanson & Douglas A. Jeffrey: The Never Trumpers
Michael Barone: Trump’s Democrats • Mark Helprin: Say No to the 2020 Revolution

Matthew B. Crawford: Manliness Today
Steven F. Hayward: Charles Moore’s Thatcher
Sally C. Pipes: Health Care Is Not a Right

Thomas Sowell: The Unheavenly City Revisited
John O'Sullivan: Anne Applebaum’s Ex-Friends
Robert Royal: Discovering Columbus

Christopher Caldwell: The Pilgrims at 400
Harvey C. Mansfield: The Extraordinary Machiavelli
Oren Cass: When Market Economists Fail

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The phrase “never trump” collectively designates many successive waves of elite opposition to President Donald Trump on the part of supposed conservatives. The resistance began with Trump’s renegade candidacy in 2016. It has continued in various forms throughout his first term in office. The most prominent exponents include former Republicans and members of the mostly vestigial neoconservative establishment in New York and Washington, D.C.

The original Never Trumpers were led by pundits like Max Boot, George Will, and Jennifer Rubin, each at the Washington Post, David Brooks and Bret Stephens at the New York Times, and David Frum at the Atlantic. Assorted failed presidential candidates such as Jeb Bush, Mitt Romney, and John Kasich also joined in the fun and often brought their political operatives along with them. Beltway foreign policy wonks, economists, lawyers, and military retirees signed on, too.

At first, in the winter of 2016, the nascent coalition assumed that it could draw and unite opposition from failing Republican presidential candidates to derail the unexpected Trump ascendance during the primaries. Between April and July 2016, on the way to the convention where Trump would become the Republican nominee, the astonished but rapidly diminishing cadre tried again and again to arrest the process. Then, in yet a third iteration, a small and stubborn rump of Never Trumpers reorganized in an even more vain attempt to stop Trump from winning the general election against Hillary Clinton.

This last-ditch effort proved especially pathetic given that it entailed a de facto preference for a thoroughly corrupt and now unabashedly leftist Clinton. Efforts by various Never Trumpers to inveigle some erstwhile luminary to run as a third-party candidate—two-time presidential disappointment Mitt Romney, for example, or popular former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice—failed. A struggling few, led by Bill Kristol, were finally reduced to near-caricature when they appealed to the obscure National Review writer David French before settling upon the completely unknown (but soon polarizing) former bureaucrat Evan McMullin. The more the effort continued to draft a third-party candidate, the fewer and more unattractive became the willing candidates.

According to the rejectionist rationale, Trump’s purported low character and boorishness nullified his Republican agenda. Or else, it was argued, he would soon prove to be a liberal wolf in conservative sheep’s clothing. As a result, the logic went, one of two outlandish consummations was devoutly to be wished. Some hoped that Clinton’s putatively inevitable landslide victory would chastise wayward Republicans and prove that the Never Trump camp had been right all along. Others, more insanely, imagined that the nobody McMullin could get close enough that the race would have to be decided in the Republican House of Representatives. There, Never Trump influencers might cobble together a Marco Rubio or Ted Cruz presidency. Either way, once Trump’s nationalist-populist insurrection went deservedly down in flames, the elite Republican grandees would arise, phoenix-like, from the ashes and restore the party to its doctrinaire Bush-Romney custodians.

All this had to happen, Bret Stephens told CNN’s Fareed Zakaria, so that “Republican voters [would] forever learn their lesson.” Or, as the equally self-righteous David Frum put it from on high in an interview with CBC (the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) News, the pesky public would finally see that “Donald Trump is God’s judgment on the United States for not being good enough citizens.” Hillary Clinton may have called Trump supporters “deplorables” and “irredeemables,” and Joe Biden may have outdid them both by musing that a supposedly played-out white working class might profitably be traded altogether for new, more-pliable immigrants.

After Trump’s stunning upset, the Never Trump movement went on life support, occasionally opening its eyes when Trump’s polls dip into the low 40s. Never Trumpers’ ability and inclination to make a nuisance of themselves follows the news cycle. They have recently been buoyed by a succession of media scandal stories, from Robert Mueller’s special counsel investigation (during which Max Boot listed “18 reasons Trump could be a Russian asset”); to the Ukraine melodrama; to the impeachment plot; to the COVID-19 contagion; to the demonstrations, looting, and arson that followed the tragic death of George Floyd. But they have tended to grow despondent, and occasionally even silent,

Oxford University Press, 304 pages, $27.95

Disloyal Opposition: How the #NeverTrump Right Tried—and Failed—to Take Down the President, by Julie Kelly.
Encounter Books, 240 pages, $25.99

Book Review by Victor Davis Hanson
upon hearing news of successes such as near-record unemployment, a legion of conservative judicial appointments, or restoration of American support for Israel. Like the obsessive Captain Ahab, Never Trumpers believe that with just one more comparison to the Nazis, one more televised meltdown, or one more edgy new blog, they will finally spear the great white whale.

Throughout these fiascos, never Trump has been kept alive not by resurgent popular support, but by money from leftwing billionaires (such as eBay founder Pierre Omidyar) who appreciate Never Trump pundits as ephemerally useful idiots. Never Trumpers insist to these new patrons that they are moving hearts and changing minds, despite the fact that Trump support among Republicans has tended to poll at record levels, hovering around or often over 90%.

For such a supposedly thoughtful bunch, the Never Trumpers rarely engage in introspection. They have never once explained how, after two decades of Republican resurgence at the state and local level, the party still managed to lose five out of the six national popular votes prior to Trump. The last time a Republican candidate had won at least 51% of the popular vote was George H.W. Bush’s 1988 victory over Governor Michael Dukakis. (Even that feat was carried off by the proto-Trumpian Lee Atwater, who was as praised during that bitter campaign for his populist insight even as he was damned afterward for winning cruelly and gracelessly.) Few Never Trumpers can fathom why millions of culturally conservative working voters in swing states such as Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania either stayed home or voted Democrat until Trump brought them back into the fold. On this score, even warnings from such mainstream conservative analysts as Reihan Salam and soon-to-be-Never Trump Ross Douthat went ignored. Both Salam and Douthat cautioned long before 2016 that ignoring the so-called “Sam’s Club” populist voter would mean a near-permanent Democratic White House.

In Never Trump: The Revolt of the Conservative Elites, two liberal political scientists—Robert P. Saldin of the University of Montana and Steven M. Teles of Johns Hopkins University—reveal that they too are less interested in the conditions that created Trumpism than in the opposition it engendered among elites such as themselves. “If the mass of voters cannot be counted on to protect democratic norms,” they write, “then it is hard to see who else could do so other than party elites.” In their view, the respectable patricians of the Republican Party know better, and are worthy of more careful examination, than the unwatched electorate.

Though they are unapologetically condescending and unremittingly partisan, Saldin and Teles nonetheless offer a scholarly and well-researched analysis of what still drives the Never Trumpers despite their irrelevance and poor judgment. The book collates dozens of long, angry, and sometimes embarrassingly clueless interviews with failed Never Trumpers, supplemented by plentiful quotations from the voluminous archives of written anti-Trump invective. Taken together, these sources display a staggering degree of oblivious self-righteousness: in 2016, for example, one foreign policy expert said, “After enjoying Trump’s crushing defeat this November, I plan to keep working inside the Republican Party for a sane version of conservatism on issues foreign and domestic.”

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Saldin and Teles identify four broad categories of Never Trumpers: national security experts, political operatives and lobbyists, public intellectuals, and coastal-corridor lawyers and economists. It is the authors’ contention that these conscientious objectors command far more indirect influence than their relatively small numbers suggest. Thus, much of Never Trump focuses on arcane and now-forgotten declarations of conscience signed by scores of foreign policy establishment types who were outraged at the very thought of a Trump presidency. Readers are invited to revisit reams of protestation against Trump’s unorthodox promises concerning everything from Chinese mercantilism to the Iran Deal and relations with Israel.

There are also plenty of quotes from “wise men” to demonstrate just how loathed Trump was and what brazen free-thinkers his critics were. Saldin and Teles too often miss the grand irony of this portrayal. The original Never Trumpers were in fact the furthest possible thing from trailblazing independents. They were mainstream establishmentarians who did what practically everyone else in their highbrow set was doing in 2015: they blithely wrote off the supposedly wacky loser Trump. It was rich, to say the least, to see these conformists reinvented in 2016 as brave contrarians bucking the common consensus of a sure-thing Trump candidacy.

The authors cite with approval the orthodox Never Trump conviction that Trump’s campaign team were oh so pathetic: “In contrast to the professional organizations supporting [the other] candidates, Donald Trump’s campaign hired a decidedly less accomplished team of misfits and oddballs.” This is an odd claim given the campaigns manifest success. It is strange to find the Trump team denigrated as “a ridiculous band of degenerates and professional failures” when in fact they proved themselves far more astute than either Hillary Clinton’s overpaid apparatus or the Never Trumpers’ own perennially failed consultant class.

The book’s subtitle, the revolt of the Conservative Elites, reflects well its authors’ focus on once-influential Washington and New York grandees. But given that the authors themselves are progressives, interviewed few Trump supporters (if any), read very little pro-Trump literature, and never really tried to understand the conditions that created Trump, perhaps a more apt subtitle might reflect their own schadenfreude—something like How the Republican Nobility Got What They Desired. After all, Saldin and Teles conclude, with a hint of satisfaction: “It is hard not to look at these efforts, at least as of the spring of 2020, as having comprehensively failed. Donald Trump is as popular with Republican voters as any president in the modern era.”

Like the sore losers whom they interview, Saldin and Teles monotonously insist that Republicans should have known their flawed ideology had spawned an infectious Trump “poison” out in the heartland. Nonetheless, the authors trust that erudite, sober, and judicious sages can offer their party redemption in the form of a new, more principled (but likely perennially losing) opposition to progressivism. Smart and well-meaning Never Trumpers are the ideal patsies to provide the “system maintenance activity that a healthy liberal democracy requires”—i.e., a domesticated opposition with absolutely no chance of ever governing. A cynic might conclude that Saldin and Teles are urging Republicans to stop cruelly winning and return to their accustomed dignified losing.
Quite different in tone, style, and theme is Julie Kelly’s Disloyal Opposition: How the #NeverTrump Right Tried—and Failed—to Take Down the President. Whereas Saldin and Teles paint a stately portrait of the noble Never Trumpers, Kelly, a senior contributor to American Greatness, offers a darker side to their image. She unsurprisingly reveals that Never Trump intellectuals can be every bit as crude as their detested nemesis—and that, for all their erudition, they are far less capable students of American popular opinion than he.

I agree with Kelly’s assessment, given that I have personally been smeared in the online Never Trump journal the Bulwark as, among other things, akin to Nazi apologists such as Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger. For all the accusations that Trump has cheapened political discourse, it is actually the Never Trumpers who have reached new lows of crudity. Former John McCain politico Rick Wilson called Trump supporters “childless single men who masturbate to anime” and indulged on live television in an ignorant rant about white-trash “Boomer rubes,” complete with a mock Southern drawl.

Kelly’s focus is on the irrational hatred that motivates Never Trumpers to reject almost anything the president says or does. At some point it became clear that Trump would adopt the traditional Republican attitude on a range of issues—gas and oil development, deregulation, judicial appointments, education reform, tax cuts, and restoration of the military. Never Trumpers were thus forced either to concede that the president had successfully implemented policies they had been championing for a lifetime, or suddenly to disown those policies. Most chose the latter and thereby demonstrated, in Kelly’s view, that they are not so much conservatives as opportunists, more loyal to their class than to their supposed principles. She is especially scathing toward Jennifer Rubin and Bret Stephens because she suspects their supposed changes of heart were calculated bids for plum new jobs at the Washington Post and New York Times, respectively.

Before the Trump wrecking ball went crashing through Washington, Never Trumpers had grown accustomed to being courted by Republican presidents, sought out as administration consilirges, and lauded for the winsome insight of their syndicated columns. Kelly, like Saldin and Teles, suggests that the high self-regard of those in the Washington echo chamber blinded them to their irrelevance in opposing Trump. “Consumed with their self-importance and alarmed at their potential demotion within the GOP,” she writes, “they pledged to crush the brash interloper who had never edited a very important magazine or toiled at a very important conservative foundation.”

And perhaps, as Kelly also argues, many of these newly christened freedom fighters were never conservatives at all and saw Trump as a useful opportunity to renounce their increasingly bothersome creed and party. Even before Trump, these careerists did not care about electing conservative presidents so much as about advising and profiting from Conservatism, Inc.—the weak, eager-to-please, and largely incompetent conservative ruling class.” Kelly points out that Bill Kristol cheerfully boasted, “We are all Democrats now.” Max Boot echoed that sentiment when he described Republicans as the “party of the child-snatchers.” Soon Bret Stephens was in his New York Times readers that he wanted to repeal the Second Amendment, while George Will urged the defeat of the Republican Congress in 2018.

Kelly pulls no punches. The never Trump movement is, in her estimation, “a small assortment of embittered, parochial conservatives.” Their flip-flopping quotations, class pretensions, and hyperbole are all predictably sour grapes from “failed campaign consultants, B-list conservative commentators, fading political columnists, and Bush-family loyalists.” In the end, she asserts that the real subject of Never Trump furor is the diminished status of Never Trump itself. She quotes Max Boot’s lamentation: “I am left to ask if all my work has made any difference.” Never Trumpers, she concludes, have become so gorged with hatred that they now just come across as kind of nutty. Mitt Romney was finally reduced to aggregating attacks on Trump (and broadcast media praise of himself) under the weird Twitter pseudonym “Pierre Delecto.”

Kelly’s description of Never Trumpers as “disloyal” is harsh. But what she has in mind is not their general opposition to Trump but that they did not wait for the election of 2020 to unseat him. They chose instead to promote the fraudulent Steele dossier, hype up the inconsequential Ukraine caper, and generally assume that Trump’s purported evil justified almost any means necessary to remove an elected president. Like Saldin and Teles, Kelly suspects that Never Trumpers actually can do Trump some harm by using progressive resources to attack him with suburban swing voters. At the very least, she notes, their long-standing media and government contacts within the Washington establishment have caused plenty of trouble for Trump in the swamp. Thousands of high-ranking bureaucrats, military officers, and revolving-door think tank intellectuals have either worked to thwart the administration from the outside or, once within, to leak, subvert, and destroy it.

As Kelly notes, Kristol bragged, “[If it comes to it, I] prefer the deep state to the Trump state”—essentially green-lighting an unelectable resistance to an elected president. But could the Never Trumpers ever have succeeded in actually stopping the Trump candidacy or presidency? One gathers from Kelly’s book that they would have had to make two key arguments in order to do so. First, they would have had to show that Trump’s boorishness exceeded any prior president’s and would cancel out any positive agenda. That would require considerable historical ignorance, given the White House promise of John Kennedy, the crotch bathroom antics of Lyndon Johnson, and the crude Oval Office lechery of Bill Clinton—not to mention a prior presidential plethora of in-office sin in the age before the internet and 24-hour digital news. Second, Never Trumpers would have had to claim that a traditional Bush-McCain-Romney approach could really have succeeded in targeting illegal immigration, forcing China to abide by international trade agreements, restoring economic vitality in the nation’s heartland, and returning American foreign policy to a Jacksonian realism. Or at least, they would have had to explain persuasively why all these policies were or should have been irrelevant to conservative voters in the states that decide national elections.

The wonder is not so much that Never Trumpers never successfully made either argument, but that they never even felt the need to try.

Victor Davis Hanson is a senior fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, and the author, most recently, of The Second World Wars: How the First Global Conflict Was Fought and Won (Basic Books).
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