

How the GOP Blew It With Trump

The party made a series of miscalculations that let the improbable candidate become the presumptive nominee.



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It wasn't even a year ago that Republicans couldn't wait for November 2016. They boasted their strongest presidential field ever, a lineup of senators and governors—any one of whom, they said, would thrash Democrat Hillary Clinton.

Today, their voters have all but signed, sealed, and delivered the presidential nomination to a blustery reality-TV star with sky-high disapproval ratings but little evident knowledge or interest in the actual duties of the presidency.

True, Donald Trump could still technically lose the nomination, should his campaign somehow collapse before the final June 7 primaries. And, true, he could overcome enormous obstacles to win the White House in November.

Yet in all likelihood, Republicans putting the pieces back together this winter will be reliving the events and choices of last summer and autumn as they try to answer: Where did we go wrong?

While they'll no doubt come up a long list of things, here are seven:

1) Tuesday morning, after Indiana Republicans had already been voting for hours, Ted Cruz began an impromptu news conference with this: "I'm going to tell you what I really think of Donald Trump." What made the tirade that followed so extraordinary was that Cruz, more than any other candidate in the race, had regularly praised Trump for months. In December, trying to undo reports that he'd criticized Trump to donors behind closed doors, Cruz sent out a tweet saying he would not get into a "cage match" with Trump. Then he called him "terrific." Cruz, though, was only the most extreme example of a general unwillingness by the other 16 candidates to challenge Trump. Only Florida Gov. Jeb Bush regularly questioned Trump's views and qualifications from the start of the race. All hoped that Trump would either go away on his own, or that they would be the last non-Trump candidate standing.

2) If the candidates misjudged Trump, so did the Republican Party in allowing him to hijack its primaries. There were a number of missteps, but most seemed to cascade from a single failure: It appears no one at party headquarters, despite a top-flight research unit, bothered to determine whether Trump was as wealthy as he claimed. Even before he formally entered the race, a number of books and articles over the years laid out evidence that Trump was actually worth at most a fraction of the "TEN BILLION DOLLARS" he claimed in a press release. And after he did file his financial disclosure statement in July, a review would have quickly shown that he had, at most, \$232 million in cash and relatively liquid assets, with the rest tied up in buildings and golf courses. If this information had been known among the Republican National Committee leaders, they might have been less ready to believe Trump's vague threats to run as a third-party candidate, which in this era would require close to \$1 billion.

3) This flawed assessment of Trump's likelihood of running as an independent—which in effect would hand Clinton the presidency—prompted RNC Chairman Reince Priebus to visit Trump Tower to secure his signature on a pledge to support the eventual GOP nominee. "When Reince did that, he never had power in that relationship again," fumed one GOP consultant privately. Trump, of course, not long afterward claimed the pledge was no longer valid because the party had not treated him fairly.

RNC members today defend their handling of the debates and primaries, arguing that they had an obligation to be completely neutral. Other can-

didates who were repeatedly relegated to the “kids-table” debates have already argued that the party’s decisions were not neutral. In any case, Priebus did not have to solicit Trump’s signature on his pledge—he just as easily could have banned Trump from any further debates until he did sign it. How might the primaries have turned out if he’d done that?

4) Not understanding Trump’s actual wealth had another consequence that continues to muddy the party’s decision-making. From the beginning of the primaries last fall to this day, many RNC members have believed that Trump’s personal wealth would make the party’s fundraising much easier during the general-election campaign. As it turns out, the RNC will have a candidate who has no network of donors, no fundraising infrastructure, and who has insulted the donor class as special interests whose money he neither wants nor needs. Campaign manager Corey Lewandowski, in fact, has even floated the idea of accepting federal financing—a decision that would allow Clinton to outspend Trump by a factor of eight or 10 or more.

5) If the candidates were boxed in by their collective game theory and the party was squeamish about involving itself in the fray, there were still the conservative outside groups who could have challenged Trump. One of those, the Club for Growth Action, did run \$1 million worth of negative ads against Trump in Iowa last September. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that Trump was immune to those negative hits, his poll numbers actually fell 8 points in the state while the ads were on the air, and then went back up when they ended. The Club had hoped others would join in and continue bashing Trump, but no one did—until early this year when the “Never Trump” movement began soliciting donations and running ads. Trump did finish second in Iowa, but he won New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Nevada—results that paved the way for his big wins on Super Tuesday and Florida in March. The “Never Trump” campaign, obviously, was too little and too late.

6) A somewhat overlooked factor was the unintended consequence of the RNC’s decision to shorten the primary schedule. The party believed that in the 2012 cycle, the numerous debates and the early run of primaries that required proportional distribution of delegates damaged nominee Mitt Romney’s prospects in the general election. Ironically, the fewer debates and the earlier winner-take-all primaries this time have played to Trump’s benefit, letting him roll up a big delegate advantage quickly.

7) Perhaps the fundamental mistake underlying all others, of course, was the party’s assumption that its primary voters would never support a vulgar thrice-married New Yorker with a string of checkered business

vague, since marked New York with a string of checkered business deals and bankruptcies. But attend any Trump rally, talk to his supporters, and it becomes clear just how big a slice of the GOP voting base is completely uninterested in the “conservative principles” of less regulation and lower taxes. Rather, many long for a return to an era when white, less-educated people could still get good-paying factory jobs and when government wasn’t supposedly wrapped up helping blacks, Latinos, and all “the others” that are changing the country. Trump is the one candidate who grandly promised to give the white working class what it wants.

This last point reflects again the party’s decades’-long reliance on a demographic that will continue to shrink in the coming years. Party leaders understand this all too well. Their post-2012 “autopsy” spoke of the need to broaden the party to bring in like-minded minorities, particularly Latinos. Perhaps there is a silver lining for the party should current trends hold and Clinton win easily in November: The RNC won’t need to spend a lot of time writing a new autopsy. Updating a few stats and slapping on a new cover ought to do it.

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TRUMP IS PRESUMPTIVE
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**Ted Cruz Bows
Out, Effectively Ceding
the Contest to Trump**

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THE LATEST

And just like that, it’s over. Ted Cruz will suspend his presidential campaign after losing badly to Donald Trump in Indiana tonight. “While Cruz had always hedged when asked whether he would quit if he lost Indiana; his campaign had laid a huge bet on the state.” John Kasich’s campaign has pledged to carry on. “From the beginning, I’ve said that I would continue on as long as there was a viable path to victory,” said Cruz. “Tonight, I’m sorry to say it appears that path has been foreclosed.”