

In Defence of Donald Trump

The principal news about Donald Trump's candidacy for the U.S. Republican presidential nomination is not the sometimes controversial things that he says, but the increasingly hysterical responses to him from the traditionally respectable political quarters that he discomforts. In this shrill political atmosphere, he is not the chief offender to civil standards of political discourse. Roger Cohen wrote in The New York Times last week, and he was reprinted in the National Post on Wednesday, that Trump was reminiscent of Hitler, that there were serious comparisons between Weimar Germany (1919-1933) and the contemporary United States, and that American politics is being Europeanized. By this, Cohen meant succumbing to the charms of France's Front National, fascism, and, quite explicitly, Nazism. Unfortunately, this theme was taken up in a National post editorial and letters on Thursday, Dec.17. The editorial represented Donald Trump as "manifestly a mean-spirited, egomaniacal buffoon unfit to govern." In The Globe and Mail the same day, Trump was lampooned by the urbane John Doyle as a practitioner of Dr. Joseph Goebbels' Big Lie.

I wrote about the Trump candidacy in my column in the National Review Online (New York) last week and it was widely reposted, including by Donald himself. He is not my preferred candidate but I denounced the Cohen piece, as well as the comparison of Trump with Senator Joseph R. McCarthy by Max Boot, a distinguished guerrilla war and Middle East expert. Now that the Cohen comments have migrated to Canada, I say that that column, and reflections like it, including these local echoes, are ignorant, false, and grossly misleading. There is no comparison to be drawn between any of these individuals, except in contrasts, and the outrages committed by this sort of Trump-accuser are far more egregious than even Donald's clumsiest sallies.

As Donald Trump tweeted when he posted my National Review

piece, we are friends, and I know him to be a generous, honourable and decent man, and a loyal friend (he volunteered to testify on my behalf in my trial in Chicago in 2007, when he certainly had other things to do. He distinguished himself in a difficult time for me far beyond many exalted "friends" and worthies in this country.) He is a very successful developer of highest quality buildings and has been a successful television personality. His attraction to voters is not based on appeals to violence, or incitements to racial or sectarian hate and he does not espouse an illiberal society or American aggression in the world, or any undemocratic alterations of the American political system. Cohen imagines that German hyper-inflation came at the end and not the beginning of the Weimar Republic, and equates the negative consequences of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with the German defeat in the First World War, in which all responsibility for that war was pinned on Germany and it lost a lot of territory, all its overseas empire, and took seven million casualties. "Afghanistan and Iraq have been the graveyards of glory," and (Hitler) "was an outsider given to theatrics and pageantry. He seduced the nation of Beethoven. He took the world down with him." (Beethoven was a German and Hitler was an Austrian but this is beside the point.) The attempted comparisons are a travesty and an outrage.

Canadians have a little more excuse for their frenzy and the National Post editorial correctly blamed traditional candidates and media for not focusing seriously on the issues Trump has emphasized rather sensationally. The United States has a much more complicated sociology than Canada, including the legacies of slavery, massive illegal immigration, and the responsibilities and mistakes of a great world power for over a century. Foreigners generally like weak U.S. presidents like Obama, other than when they need strong presidents to defend them, like most of those between Franklin Roosevelt and the senior Bush. And foreigners always overreact to the polemical excesses of U.S. presidential candidates. Much the same as the

Trump nonsense was widely spoken of Goldwater and Reagan. Goldwater was innocuous and Reagan is now a candidate for Mount Rushmore. In the circumstances, the comments about Trump of Justin Trudeau, Rona Ambrose, and others, while relatively inoffensive, are not really relevant.

Donald Trump has made the points, albeit in a way that invites misunderstanding, that 11 million illegal entrants from Mexico are not the socioeconomic cream of that nationality and that it is impossible to screen out terrorists among a large intake of immigrants from the Middle East. He has said that while many of the illegal Mexican migrants are doubtless good people, they came illegally and include many who have raised the crime rate and the welfare costs of the United States. He has been accused of calling them all rapists and this is a grotesque misstatement of what he said. He said that no Muslims should be admitted to the United States until they can be screened securely. He should have been more careful how he expressed these views, but to use these statements as the basis for likening him to someone who destroyed German democracy, murdered 12 million unoffending people in death camps (half of them Jews), and unleashed war across Europe, North Africa, and the Atlantic, is a monstrous abuse of the right of fair comment.

As for Max Boot, Senator McCarthy accused Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower and General George C. Marshall, of being Communist dupes, and incited pathological fears that the U.S. government was a vast infestation of Soviet agents and traitors, and that communists arose as if infected by a virus, all over America, and had to be exterminated like termites. Where Max Boot imagines Donald Trump fits into any such nightmare escapes my comprehension. The French National Front is a Poujadist petit bourgeois party that is alarmed about Islamic terror in a country that has suffered a lot of it and where 10 per cent of the population is Muslim. The party leader, Marine Le Pen, expelled her own

father from membership because he is a Holocaust minimizer.

What Donald actually advocates is the deportation of 351,000 illegal immigrants convicted of crimes and now imprisoned; the end of illegal immigration by building an Israeli-like wall along the Mexican border; an (as yet unspecified) screening process to justify the deportation of some of the illegals and the normalization of the others; and although he advocates the suspension already mentioned of Muslim immigration (not the Christians who are almost half of the refugees), he at least acknowledges that the United States is partly responsible for the political chaos that generated this humanitarian tragedy in the first place. He wants only a small increase in defence spending, reallocated to more effective anti-terrorism; and universal health care through health savings accounts and by smashing the insurance cartel. He is for the gradual legalization of most drugs; is a militant anti-polluter, but correctly (on present evidence) regards climate change and cap-and-trade as hoaxes. He wants to leave education (and same-sex marriage) to the states and to give them the money now wasted in the federal Department of Education. He would ban only late-term abortions, and not when there were overriding circumstances. He would reform the corrupt shambles of campaign financing by abolishing super-PACs and soft money, and lift limits on individual contributions to political candidates. He is a moderate protectionist opposite cheap labour countries, and advocates marginal income tax reductions and the reconstitution of the bloated national debt as a sinking fund to be gradually reduced by spending restraint, implicitly involving an imprecise level of entitlement-reform.

Trump opposes foreign intervention in areas where the U.S. has no natural interest, including Ukraine and Syria, but wants a redefinition of the national security interest of the country, and wants to protect that interest, unlike Obama, but not over-extend it, unlike George W. Bush. This is not a radical program. He is fed up with those mealy-mouthed politicians and

commentators who nibble around issues and show more concern for the sensibilities of Islam than the security of America, and who ignored every major issue that has arisen for decades – abortion, illegal immigration, wealth disparity, the corruption of campaign financing, and he is not wrong.

Donald Trump is paying for his own campaign, is not dependent on special interests or a sleazy, opinionated gaggle of Hollywood fund-raising philistines or a jaded electoral machine. He may not be the answer, but he is not a kook or a menace. Nor is he quite the phenomenon he seems; the United States has often had previously unelected people as presidential candidates, usually famous soldiers such as Washington, Jackson, W.H. Harrisons, Taylor, Grant, and Eisenhower (and unsuccessful nominees Cass, Scott, Fremont, McClellan, Hancock, and some non-military nominees also – Horace Greeley, Alton Parker, Wendell Willkie, and Herbert Hoover). Prominent military officers and other non-politicians ran a total of 30 times in the 43 presidential elections from 1788 to 1956.

The United States has had 20 years of incompetent government from presidents and Congresses of both parties, which are responsible for an immense and easily avoidable world-wide economic crisis, two absurd and tragic wars, the humiliation of the country with mindless interventionism, self-erasing “red lines,” a cave-in to a nuclear Iran, and a doubling of the national debt of 233 years of American history in eight years. It is little wonder that Americans are thinking of someone not complicit in any of this. America’s previous rise from colonial obscurity to world pre-eminence in three lifetimes (1783-1991) was without the slightest precedent or parallel in the history of the world. The people are right to be mad as hell. Canada has been more sensibly governed than the United States these last 20 years and is more equable.

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