

Trump Still Has a Great Opportunity

by Conrad Black

It is already a platitude that Donald Trump had a bad week. The stridently partisan national (and international) media have translated Mrs. Clinton's unimpressive and fairly narrow victory in the first debate into a terrible "drubbing" (the word is that of a Canadian journalist; they tend to be even more intoxicated by the anti-Trump Kool Aid than the American media). And Mr. Trump has rather sullenly receded into his worrisome and self-demeaning habit of focusing on absurd side issues in a coarse way. It is understandable that the owner of the Miss Universe contest would feel that his brand was being abused by a successful contestant who then put on weight. But the middle of a presidential election campaign against the country's first major-party female nominee is not the time to call a former beauty queen Miss Piggy. This isn't a matter of misogyny at all, as the Democrats and their darkened sky of screaming parrots in the media claim; it's just ungracious. I find it impossible to imagine any president of the United States using that phrase publicly, except in reference to the Muppets character.

Even Donald's friends are becoming impatient at the time he is taking to realize that when you seek to be, in Franklin D. Roosevelt's phrase, "the head of the American people," you have to use, publicly at least, the vocabulary of its most civilized people, no matter what prodigies you have expended to round up the support of a vast swath of the less genteel.

President Truman was criticized for writing a letter to someone who had criticized his daughter's musical abilities and saying that, if they met, the critic would need an athletic protector, though most people identified with a

father who was defending his daughter from cheap media shots. In 1960, when Mr. Truman mounted his own personal campaign for John F. Kennedy, but more particularly against Richard Nixon, and said in a campaign appearance in Texas that the Republicans could "go to hell." Nixon invited Kennedy to ask the 76-year-old former president to clean up his language. Kennedy lost no votes when he replied: "Perhaps Mrs. Truman can ask him to change his language, but I can't."

There was a widespread revulsion against the coarseness of some of President Nixon's comments to his closest entourage in his office, as picked up by the Oval Office recording device. But these were private conversations and if televised today would be routine fare for viewers. However, escalating as an issue a completely irrelevant snide reflection on a woman's appearance, in a presidential campaign, is unacceptable behavior for the seeker of so great an office. If Donald Trump doesn't smarten up, he is going to scuttle his own ship, just before it could come in.

Any campaign for the presidency, even one that proves to be very one-sided, such as the reelections of FDR (1936), Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan (all defeated their opponents by between 15 and 23 percentage points in the popular vote), requires some strategy. Donald Trump astounded the entire political class of America by becoming only the third person ever to gain the presidential nomination of a major American political party without having first been an elected official, a prominent military officer, or a cabinet member, and the first to do so in 76 years. (Wendell Willkie, in 1940, never had control of the Republicans and had little chance against Roosevelt.) Senator Rubio was correct to call it "a tsunami that only Mr. Trump saw coming," but it was also a tsunami that he largely conjured up out of less turbulent air and intensified. He raised the Republican primary vote by 60 percent over 2012, and whatever happens from now on, his achievement is historic

and there must have been some astute strategic calculations behind it.

Yet Trump seems to have no concept of how to press the strategic advantage and stay clear of back alleys and side issues in which he can only dissipate his advantages. Like a not overly smart fighting bull, he allows the Democrats to cause him to charge diagonally past his real targets and squander political capital in nonsense. The presentation of Mr. Khan at the Democratic convention, father of a winner of the Medal of Honor, was squalid and outrageous, as was the subsequent fawning of the media and the bunk about Mr. Khan's just "happening to have a copy of the Constitution in [his] pocket." But Trump charged and dove into a trap in which he could not win. He should have said something like "All Americans share in Mr. Khan and his family's sorrow and in their pride, and in the circumstances it is not appropriate for me to comment on his partisan reflections on me." He should have said, when Mrs. Clinton threw "Miss Piggy" at him, that "that was a regrettable choice of words about someone who had violated her undertakings on entering the Miss Universe contest." He could have neutralized, or even won on, both issues but failed to see them as the baited traps they obviously were.

This does raise questions about his judgment. Four years ago, Peggy Noonan referred to my distinguished friend Newt Gingrich, as he surged against Mitt Romney, as "a human grenade with the pin pulled, saying 'Watch this!'" Newt is now one of the sources of sound advice around Donald. Among the others are Kellyanne Conway and Melania and the rest of his widely and deservedly admired family. Any student of strategy in any field, indeed any intelligent person, knows to execute Napoleon's precept of application of maximum pressure at the opponent's most vulnerable point. Mrs. Clinton has many vulnerabilities. No major-party presidential candidate has ever been so encumbered by questions of her probity and

ethical suitability to be president. According to the FBI director, she is effectively an unindicted (for political reasons) perjurer, and the open-spigot infusion of cash into the Clinton Foundation by seekers of U.S. government favor makes her a gigantic sitting duck. She did nothing noteworthy in the U.S. Senate or the State Department despite all the prattling about her experience, and did a U-turn in lock-step with Obama on the shameful nuclear and financial giveaway to the terrorism-sponsoring theocrats in Tehran. Her election would flat line the economy, enthrone political correctness, and reduce the judiciary to the same putrefied sardine can of emasculated liberalism and corrupt incumbency that the national media have become.

Trump started on some of these points and was frustrated to a degree by the biased moderator, who deliberately misled viewers about stop and frisk and Trump's opposition to the second Iraq war. (Peggy Noonan was also correct last Saturday in the Wall Street Journal to warn the press again that their massive bias against Trump is unprofessional and will seriously alienate the public. It will, and the media are less likely to raise their game than Trump is.) Even after she rallied after the first quarter of the debate, Mrs. Clinton displayed the substantive vacuity of her campaign on the fatuous birther issue: It was never a racial question at all, only a matter of Obama's constitutional eligibility for election.

It must also be said that for the first time in the campaign, Mrs. Clinton made an intelligent policy point in calling for a drastic reform of the criminal-justice system. It's fine for Trump to support the police, but the United States has 48 million official felons, ten times as many incarcerated people per capita as Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom, and the North Korean-level prosecution success rate of 99.5 percent, 97 percent without trial. It is a shameful mockery of the Bill of Rights, and it is to Hillary

Clinton's credit that she has extracted, at this late date, the one meritorious element of the late Sanders campaign (which almost defeated her).

After all this, Trump is only about three points behind, and is still ahead or about even in enough states to win. The assumed IRS leak of some of his tax records de-fangs that phony issue as surely as disclosure by Mr. Obama finally made an end of the birther nonsense. He has all his best ammunition left to fire in the debate on Sunday (Benghazi, the Foundation, perjury), and has lowered the bar of expectation for his own performance almost to subterranean levels. The choice is still between more of the Bush-Clinton-Obama disaster decades or positive change. This is one of the defining moments of American history. If Donald doesn't exploit the opportunity he has created from public resentment of the Clintons' entitlement, from the flabby Republican Bush-McCain-Romney loser syndrome, and from Obama's national power-dive in which two-thirds of Americans now think the country is going in the wrong direction, he will have only himself to blame.

He must stop scowling, stop personalizing everything and being goaded like an oaf, and stay on message; if he does all that, he will make history. The writing is on the wall and if Donald Trump blows it now, he will deserve to be deposited on the crowded shelf of the trophies attesting to the political skill, determination, and chicanery of the Clintons and their vast, and now fearful, entourage.

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