

What a Spectacle this Election has Been

by Conrad Black

Squalid, garish, heavy-laden with mud-slinging and mired in corruption though the U.S. election campaign is, almost unmitigated mockery of everything that the founding documents of the United States proclaimed as they artfully reinterpreted a rather grubby colonial tax squabble with Great Britain into the dawn of human liberty, though it also is, it has been engrossing. The campaign, entertaining, dramatic, and even worrisome, has had an almost hypnotic fascination. From the polemics of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, through the wrenching dramas of its national progress, especially the Civil War, the Wild West, the gangsters, the struggles of successive groups seeking equal rights, more assassinations of prominent figures than have afflicted any other major country, and a century dominating the film industry, and producing big musicals and giant sporting events, the United States has never lost the genius of the spectacle. This campaign has been one of its greatest feats of the genre.

It has been so tainted by profound skepticism about both major candidates from the start that it began as an orgy of bad taste and carpet-bombing smears and has accelerated toward an almost unheard of climax of threats and accusations. But, with a bit of context, what has happened is not so surprising. For its first 75 years, the United States was growing quickly but walking on eggshells as a "house divided" (Lincoln) between free and slave states. After the noble and terrible resolution of that problem, for 50 years mainly rather passive administrations let America be America. It tripled in population between the Civil War and First World War, and came to operate on a scale of economic activity and social fermentation that the world had never imagined to be possible.

After Theodore Roosevelt constructed the Panama Canal, built up the navy, mediated foreign quarrels and declared the U.S. to be a world power, and Woodrow Wilson provided the margin of victory in the First World War and briefly inspired the masses of the world with a vision of enduring peace, the country lapsed back into the absurd frivolity of the Roaring Twenties. There followed what Franklin D. Roosevelt called "nine mad years of mirage, followed by three long years of the breadlines."

Prohibition, which delivered the alcoholic drinks industry to the underworld (as has more recently been done with the drugs industry), and isolation, the closing of European immigration (with tragic results in the following decades), and the equity bubble that produced the Crash, Great Depression and horrifying international political repercussions, brought in FDR. The ensuing 30 years were the golden age of American presidential government: FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy. Victory over the Depression, enabling British and Canadian continuation in the war against Hitler, victory in that war while retrieving France, Germany, Italy and Japan for the democratic West while the U.S.S.R. took more than 90 per cent of the casualties and physical devastation in subduing Nazi Germany, were followed by the institutions and policies that won the Cold War: NATO, the Marshall Plan, the strategy of containment, and the defence of West Berlin and South Korea.

The American story started to go horribly wrong with a mistaken strategy in Vietnam (failure to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, despite the advice of the country's two victorious commanders, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Douglas MacArthur), and with the self-destructive Watergate debacle. This dreadful aberration revived the criminalization of policy differences 150 years after the disputes between Jefferson and Aaron Burr. Richard Nixon, one of the country's most successful and imaginative presidents, with his own inexplicable co-operation through bungled handling of the affair, was torn down and

driven from office on absurd pretexts where there has yet to emerge any probative evidence that he did anything illegal. The Indian summer of presidential government came with Ronald Reagan, who had already run once for the Republican nomination before Watergate, and emerged as the new force in the country. He reformed the incentive economy and forced the last round of the arms race which induced the peaceful implosion of the Soviet Union. Just two centuries after the inauguration of George Washington, the United States was the only great power in the world, a rise of national strength, influence and prestige without the slightest precedent or parallel in the history of the world.

When Reagan retired at 77, his dutiful vice-president, George H.W. Bush, was elected to succeed him, but mismanaged the Republican Party, allowing a dissident to splinter its vote and bring in the Clintons from the remote fastness of Arkansas. Because Bush was the only president since Theodore Roosevelt to have sons with a political aptitude and Clinton was the only president since Franklin Roosevelt to have a wife with political aptitudes, these two families have passed the greatest offices of the country around between themselves ever since, 32 straight years as president, vice-president or secretary of state. Barack Obama was interposed by the elders of the Democratic Party eight years ago, because they had the commendable instinct to break the colour barrier for the presidency when they had the candidate and the times to do it, and Hillary Clinton took the State Department as a temporary consolation.

With the end of the Cold War, and the absence of a great national mission, and government by a cartelized regency, not meritocratic dynasties like the Adams and Roosevelts, the United States has had the worst 20 years of presidential government in its history. The housing bubble and Great Recession, admission of 12 million unskilled illegal aliens, a decade of fruitless and costly Middle East wars elevating

Iran, ultimately as a nuclear power, and producing a terrible humanitarian crisis, have been followed by a doubling of the national debt in the last seven years to produce one per cent annual economic growth while the work force has shrunk by 15 million people, and the Panglossian Obama foreign policy of telling America's friends and enemies to change roles and places, guided by evaporating red lines, aborted military missions, and waffling on a scale that has made Uriah Heap seem Churchillian, and Vladimir Putin look like Peter the Great. (In the Valley of the Weak, etc.)

Thus comes, this Tuesday, eminent American poet Robert Frost's choice of paths: continuity with Hillary Clinton, now the fusion candidate of the Clintons, Bushes and Obamas (the OBushtons), and Donald Trump, the only person in American history to have taken over an American political party without ever having held a public office or high military command. Horace Greeley in 1872, a newspaper publisher ("Go West young man, go West"), was nominated by dissident Republicans, then endorsed by Democrats to be the sacrificial offering to the former commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, seven years after he received Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox, and Wendell Willkie won the Republican nomination on the fourth ballot in 1940 for the honour of being yet another trophy on the crowded shelf of FDR, the all-time heavyweight political champion of important democratic countries, as he took a third term. Greeley had been an acting congressman for three months but neither he nor Wilkie controlled the party that nominated them.

There is and has been, and can be, no serious argument to be made for re-electing the Democrats. The only Democratic campaign has been a Niagara Falls of smears of Trump, whose often asinine juvenility has turned half his campaign into an attack ad against himself. But Trump's success, these last days, in pulling even with the Obushtons and forcing the revolt against the political cover-up of Hillary Clinton's

possible perjury to the FBI and seizing the momentum, has been a historic triumph. First he smashed the Republican elders – the pallid Bush-McCain-Romney chorus of quiescent mediocrity and the Cruz-crazies, who believe they hear God and want to hand the Pentagon to the National Rifle Association. He has now faced down and apologized for the awful Billy Bush tape and weathered the succession of New York Times' spontaneous complainants alleging that Donald had touched them without permission decades ago. After prevailing in the second debate as his campaign disintegrated under the impact of the off-mic tape release, and then in the third debate, he has shown that qualities of strength lurk beneath the brass and garish veneer of his public personality.

The United States now has before it the enormity of the corruption and license and incompetence of its political class. Only insurmountable doubts about Trump can save the Obushton status quo; hence the extreme shabbiness of the campaign. The fecundity of the theatrical imagination of America was necessary to produce so unevenly talented a crusader, but he has stormed Babylon and its rulers are being weighed in the balance. As of now, it seems that, like Belshazzar, the entire political class, executive, legislative, judicial; the biased and mendacious Washington media, the lobbyists, the whole federal sleaze factory and the Clinton pay-to-play casino – all will be found wanting. They must go.

Thus, even through wildly improbable instruments of national destiny, do great peoples renovate their institutions. Win or lose, Trump has shaken the leadership of America by the eye teeth, as it wallows in its own venality, and the country, with reservations, will adapt to him FDR's comment on his mentor and then his rival, Alfred E. Smith, and "love him for his enemies."

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