

2016: A Return to Leadership

There is increasing evidence that American politics is recovering from the dearth of good presidential candidates and potential candidates rising into governors' chairs and the U.S. Senate that has afflicted it for 30 years. I believe that the entire Watergate drama demotivated a whole generation of talented Americans from entering public life. The country knew that Richard Nixon was a talented and effective president, which is why they reelected him in 1972 by 18 million votes, and with majorities in 49 states. He extracted the U.S. from Vietnam while conserving a non-Communist government in Saigon, ended school segregation and avoided the busing of children all over metropolitan areas for racial balance (ordered by the courts), ended the draft, opened relations with China, stopped the race and anti-war riots, founded the Environmental Protection Agency, and signed the greatest arms-control agreement in history with the USSR while re-establishing American military supremacy with the multiple independently targeted ICBM warheads. Sidestepping for these purposes the issue of the extent of any presidential wrongdoing – and Nixon admitted mistakes but denied crimes, and the proof of the latter, as cant and emotionalism have subsided, is rather feeble – Americans were very demoralized by the airing of dirty laundry that was the gist of media reporting from Washington for four years, and saw honest men such as Gerald Ford and Nelson Rockefeller pilloried and insulted by abusive congressional committees and widespread media innuendo.

Ronald Reagan had already been a candidate for the presidential nomination in 1968, and retired as governor of California in 1974 to campaign seriously for president, and did so, non-stop, until elected in 1980. He was too implacably focused on that objective to be deterred by Watergate, and George H. W. Bush had held a variety of senior posts, including CIA director, ambassador to the United Nations,

representative to China, and Republican Party chairman, and had run twice for the U.S. Senate and had a lot of wind in his political sails too. These two graduates of pre-Watergate politics came through, and the country was relieved to put them in the place of the aberrant Jimmy Carter, the first of the post-Watergate hyperactive moralizers. The Reagan-Bush years were good years for America and the world, with the victorious and bloodless end of the Cold War, the great Reagan economic boom, tax cuts, and job creation, and the eviction of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, and they were relatively politically untainted years also. Bill Clinton was an above-average and popular president, but it was a rather sleazy regime, and the nomination process in both parties steadily ran down in both quality of candidates and seriousness of the process: It became ever more expensive, destructive, and based on mindless sound bites. No one cares about the president's private life, but Clinton was unable to keep his peccadilloes private, and he did not, unlike the Kennedys, Franklin Roosevelt, and others, cavort with discreet, adult women. And the role of money in high office became steadily more corrosive, as six different cabinet secretaries at one time had their own special prosecutors investigating them. In slavish continuation of Watergate and administration–Congress interparty gridlock, much of it was just the false criminalization of policy differences, but there may have been some fire under all the billowing smoke.

Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama are the only three consecutive two-term presidents since Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe (although Franklin D. Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower won seven straight terms and never lost, but Truman won only one election). But the second Bush and Obama have not, by any plausible criteria, been successful presidents, and both of them were, on balance, more impressive candidates than their opponents. There has not been such a long unbroken string of mediocrity in American presidential political history. The contending candidates became steadily less prepossessing,

concluding, everyone must fervently hope, with the procession of utterly unfeasible contenders for the Republican nomination in 2012. Governors Chris Christie (New Jersey), Mitch Daniels (Indiana), and Jeb Bush (Florida), the strongest candidates, passed, and have probably lost their chance, except possibly for Bush; and Newt ("the human grenade with the pin pulled") Gingrich, Rick ("Pius IX") Santorum, Rick ("Oops") Perry, the anti-vaccinationist Michele Bachmann, and the Lothario of the pizza industry, Herman ("the Hermanator") Cain were among those who rose to contention with Mitt Romney, before being shot down by self-destructive blundering, supplemented by Romney's well-placed attacks on them. Most of these people had some merit, but none was a serious contender to lead the country, even Romney, who, though talented, faced in all four directions on every issue and was essentially a consultant.

Now we have a president who has given new depth and color to the phrase "lame duck." Every two-term presidency since Jackson's, except the Roosevelts', has run into trouble in the last couple of years of its second term, but the inability of President Obama to collect any significant number of votes in the House of Representatives for his Pacific trade area bill, an intelligent measure that reinforces the non-Chinese countries in the Far East and makes something, at last, of the vaunted "pivot to Asia," indicates how discredited he is. The president is correct in proposing the measure, and the fact that his party's congressmen are not prepared to cast "a career-changing vote" for this measure and this president shows not only the depths to which the president's moral authority has descended, but also the level of the Democratic party's dependence on the Luddite labor movement, now composed largely of the slothful and bloated ranks of the public-sector unions.

The very soft and unconvincing beginnings of the Clinton and Bush campaigns indicate that both families' standard-bearers are running for the office because it is there and has been

occupied by close relatives, and not because they are really irresistibly motivated to win it, much less that the public is clamoring for them to set up in the Oval Office. The Benghazi debacle and address to the world's Muslims, and the bungling of the privately issued and retained e-mails, have gone a long way to sinking Hillary as an ultimate winner, even though she is a one-trick pony ("I'm a woman and I'm named Clinton") in a one-horse Democratic field. And Jeb Bush's failure to deal promptly and crisply with the question he must have known was coming for the past ten years, about the suitability of his brother's invasion and government of Iraq, seems to be helping confirm the growing national impression that the Clintons and the Bushes, whatever their past services, are not evergreen dynasties, fit to lead America back from the slough of inert confusion to which those families have helped lead it. Jeb Bush doesn't directly carry the can for the Iraqi quagmire and the economic shambles that George W. Bush brought on, and Hillary Clinton has put some distance between the Obama malaise and herself, but the natural antidote for the cumulative problems these two presidents have wrought are not George W.'s brother and Obama's first secretary of state. (They might end up being the nominees, and one of them might end up being a good president, but enthusiasm for them at this moment is not unlimited.)

For the first time since the 1966 recovery of Republicans as problems arose over the Great Society and Vietnam, when Ronald Reagan, Charles Percy, Nelson Rockefeller, Spiro Agnew, and others rose, while Democratic stalwarts Edmund G. Brown, Paul Douglas, and Mennen Williams of Michigan and many others bit the dust, there are signs of an interesting crop of promising young politicians elected governor and senator in important states. Governors Rauner (Illinois), Jindal (Louisiana), Snyder (Michigan), Kasich (Ohio), Haley (South Carolina), Walker (Wisconsin), and Senators Rubio (Florida), Paul (Kentucky), Ayotte (New Hampshire), Graham (South Carolina), and Cruz (Texas), as well as relative newcomers like Carly

Fiorina, show a sense of renovation and optimism that could start the country off on a new cycle of desperately needed reform and political reconstruction next year. Most of the prominent Republicans seem to be running close to or ahead of Hillary Clinton in current polling. These new faces might be capable of avoiding terrible pratfalls and looking like plausible and interesting holders of national office, seeing off into the instantly receding past the tired faces and clichéd ornaments of recent drift and mediocrity (the Bidens, McCains, Romneys, and Kerrys), and energizing the electorate. This might reinstill a sense of optimism and faith in an America that has turned the rascals out again and again (1992, 1994, 2000, 2006, 2008, 2010) without getting markedly better government or addressing endlessly festering problems.

Comprehensive tax, welfare, health, education, and justice reform, physical reconstruction, administrative streamlining, and a foreign policy of defined national interest attracting a national consensus – in place of the current ideological rigidity, time-warp Big Government, hemorrhaging spending and borrowing, and sophomoric ad hoc foreign-policy improvisations – are all necessary to restore a national sense of confidence. The United States secured the triumph of democracy and the free market in most of the world, and remains a democracy and market economy that, if it pulls itself together, will again be capable of world leadership and be worthy of emulation. Americans are neither accustomed to being so little respected in the world as their country is now, nor resigned to its continuing in this way. It is not an enervated society like most of Europe, is not afflicted by a death wish of national guilt, nor shattered or maladjusted from past enormities of misgovernment like Germany and Russia. It retains the pride, patriotism, and ambition of a great power, and rightfully wishes leaders who will reassert these national traits that Americans for generations had come to regard as their birthright. The ambition is justified and commendable, and need not be unrealistic.