

America the basket case

by Conrad Black

The Democratic National Convention has been a piercing glimpse into why the United States has every appearance of being a country of vulgar idiots governed by vulgar idiots. Of course it is a great country, by most measurements the greatest country there has ever been. And shame on anyone who does not acknowledge with thanks the fact that the world owes chiefly to the United States the deliverance of the world from Nazism and Communism, and the comparative success of democracy and the free market economy throughout much of the world. Having led the world for 60 years, from the time of Franklin D. Roosevelt to that of George H.W. Bush, and having achieved the greatest and most bloodless victory in the history of the nation state with the collapse, the implosion, of the Soviet Union, leaving America unbound, unrivalled, before a limitless horizon, the United States has become, in terms of national leadership, and the general taste and tenor of public discourse and policy, a basket case.

Probably the most intellectually exalted person ever to hold the office of president in that country was Thomas Woodrow Wilson, who came to the position after 10 years as president of Princeton University and one term as governor of New Jersey, which was not then a gangster-ridden series of mainly poor suburbs of New York and Philadelphia, and had some claim to being the Garden State.

The Democratic convention in 1912 was divided between speaker of the House of Representatives Beauchamp "Champ" Clark of Missouri and Wilson. Three-time unsuccessful presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan eventually threw his support to Wilson when the Tammany Hall machine of New York came out for Clark after 30 ballots, and Wilson eventually won. The Republicans, who had won four consecutive terms, split between

president William Howard Taft and former president Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt won most of the primaries but the Republican Party grandees delivered the nomination to Taft, and Roosevelt stalked out of the party, announcing that he would run as an independent: "I am at Armageddon and I fight for the Lord." With such a split among the Republicans, Bryan effectively named Wilson the next president, and Wilson rewarded him with the highest office within his gift: secretary of state.

Bryan had no qualifications for this position – he was a mighty orator, but in policy terms, a populist quack – a bimetallist supporter of silver coinage as a panacea to any lack of prosperity in society, and a militant creationist who wished to ban the teaching of evolution. (As secretary of state, he invited the nations of the world to send ships to the San Francisco World's Fair, including land-locked Switzerland.) On being nominated, Wilson said that the United States should never again have to endure the indignity of such a crass and cynical spectacle as the political convention that had just chosen him to take the headship of the nation.

This past week there have been some occurrences at the Democratic convention that rekindled such thoughts. Of course the system functions as it does and if the political parties of America want these appalling circuses and there is no better way to choose the candidates, they must continue. And sometimes, they bring forth moments of great and historic eloquence, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 ("A New Deal for the American people") and 1936 ("This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny"), and Adlai Stevenson in 1952. (He said of the Republicans, who had met in the same place: "For two weeks pompous phrases marched about this landscape in search of an idea.") There were no such enlightening moments this year.



Aaron P. Bernstein/Getty Images
Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg waves after speaking at the Democratic National Convention on July 27, 2016 in Philadelphia.

The nadir came with Michael Bloomberg, the former three-term mayor of New York and one of America's wealthiest men, as the self-made proprietor of the Bloomberg News service, an asset now estimated to be worth approximately \$35 billion. He, like Donald Trump, has been a friendly acquaintance of mine for more than 20 years and I have always liked and respected him. It is well-known that he considered running for president himself, not within a party, but as a possible independent when he saw the success Trump was enjoying in his pursuit of the Republican nomination. Bloomberg ran as an independent Republican initially as mayor of New York and has been a declared independent for some years.

That he would wish to support Hillary Clinton is perfectly unexceptionable. Not so pardonable is his shabby, ad hominem attack on Trump as a demagogue of questionable sanity, poor business ethics, rank hypocrisy, and a mollycoddled youth and career launch that made Trump's accumulation of wealth easy, if not a mirage, as well as the rewards of turpitude. Bloomberg has not been in businesses frequented by the underworld, as the construction and casino businesses are, and Bloomberg's attacks on Trump's business history were gratuitous and so churlish they invite aggressive doubts about the probity of Bloomberg's motives. If he is looking for ethical frailty in the financial lives of seekers of high office, that trophy is about to be retired in favour of the Clinton family's long record.

The whole parade of Democratic speakers except for Bloomberg have been part of the problem that has elevated Trump: the Clintons, Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Barack Obama – they have all contributed to the erosion of America's position in the world and its crumbling, oppressively declinist current ambiance. They all had something to do with

the housing bubble, the Great Recession and, except for Bill Clinton, with the doubling of the national debt in seven years and the shambles of American foreign policy – the abandoned red line, the cave-into a nuclear-armed Iran, and the half-hearted action with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, where the Western alliance has been dragged by American ineptitude into the fray alongside the Russians and Iranians in Iraq, but opposite them in Syria, while Secretary of State John Kerry pleads with European bankers to deal with Iran in a way that is still commendably illegal in the United States.

Bloomberg is clean on all this, but he has had his bad brain-waves. He speculated that a New York terrorist had been motivated by hostility to Obamacare, and not Islam; he also wanted to build a mosque adjacent to the rubble of the World Trade Center and his ego is not markedly less noticeable than the Republican candidate's. They are both entitled to that and politics, especially at that level, is no game for shrinking violets.

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Bloomberg seems to have been a competent mayor, but promised improvements in schools did not occur, and I thought making Times Square a pedestrian and bicyclists' zone was nonsense. He had to buy a squeaker of a victory over a nonentity for his third term, and got a little carried away claiming a war on obesity as a municipal prerogative. But famous mayors of New York often conduct their own foreign policy, as in Fiorello La Guardia's denunciation of Hitler, Ed Koch's harangues against the United Nations and Rudolph Giuliani's banning of Yasser Arafat from the Metropolitan Opera House. It's all New York – the more or less amiable, always noisy self-promotion of, as David Letterman used to say, "The town that never sleeps but walks all night from room to room in its underwear."

There is no reason for Bloomberg not to roll the dice in the last chance he will have for great national office by shilling for Hillary. Presumably his pay-off if Clinton wins is secretary of state, and he would be a quantum leap upward in that position from Kerry, and from Mrs. Clinton, too (not to mention William Jennings Bryan), but he didn't have to be so nasty and self-demeaning to earn his reward. His speech against his fellow billionaire, who got out and ran for president while Bloomberg was taking polls and stewing in envy, was contemptible.

Naturally, the left media did kip-ups of ecstasy at Bloomberg's anti-Trump antics. On CNN, the lone Republican on a panel of nine got half a sentence of reply after 10 minutes of apparent adults bashing Trump like a pinata.

An eminent friend in the New York financial community, originally from the Middle East, told me last week that the choice of candidates reminded him of the Arab proverb that urine "is the brother of" excrement (he used four-letter words and, as scatological comment goes, it is pretty good). I think better of it because the Trump phenomenon is so spontaneous and unprecedented, and Clinton's tenacity has a certain faded distinction, and I think either would be an improvement on the last two presidents. Politics is often a shabby occupation, and Donald and Hillary aren't the heralds of any new broom of good taste. But Bloomberg scraped the barrel and plumbed the depths, for no purpose; he won't influence the election, but unless Hillary Clinton wins and rewards his bile, this was his last public word to a national audience, and his prior career had earned a more seemly swan-song. Giuliani did much better at the Republican convention, flamboyantly calling for tighter security against terrorists.

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