

2016: The Wages of Dynastic Politics

by **Conrad Black** (April 2016)

The moment of truth is at hand for the Republicans. Much of the last 35 years of American political history was determined when James A. Baker, George H. W. Bush's campaign manager when he sought the presidential nomination in 1980, persuaded Bush to retire from the race before the Pennsylvania primary, as Bush was likely to win it, but Reagan had already secured the nomination. This brought Bush the vice-presidential nomination, and he coasted all the way into the White House eight years later. Bush allowed his party to be split by the semi-delusional mountebank billionaire Ross Perot, which enabled Bill Clinton to be elected president. Clinton had squeaked through to the Democratic nomination after giving the country a foretaste of his later peccadilloes.

Bush was the first president since John Adams to have politically serious offspring, and when Clinton's terms ended, the Bushes were back with George W., thanks to Baker's legal strategizing in the toss-up state of Florida and the decision of the Nixon, Reagan, and Bush appointees to the Supreme Court. The script was altered by Barack Obama's emergence as the first serious African-American public leader since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. He abruptly sold the party elders on the need to break the color bar at once and took the Clintons' Democratic party out from under them, no small achievement.

Hillary served as secretary of state as she waited her turn, while the ex-president in the family made the Clintons rich for the first time. The Bushes were sitting it out too, and George W. was generally reckoned an unsuccessful president. But Jeb Bush was now at the front of the line of eligible Bushes as former governor of Florida, and the conventional wisdom in the Republican party was that their time would come again. There is an inexorability about the incumbency of both families, which between them held great office eight straight terms (1981–2013), and both were straining in the slips to get back to it these last four years.

Both George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton were probably moderately above-average

presidents. But Bush left Saddam in place in Baghdad, urged Ukraine to remain under Russian suzerainty (the "chicken Kiev" speech), violated his pledge not to impose new taxes, and had no idea how to deal with the 1992 recession. Bill Clinton cranked up the \$800 billion current-account deficit, and created by legislation and executive order the housing bubble that rose under George W. Bush and produced the greatest economic crisis in 80 years – to which Obama has responded by doubling the accumulated national debt of 233 years, in seven years, to produce a fragile 2 percent growth rate. Hillary Clinton is headed to a narrow victory over the completely implausible old Marxist senator Bernie Sanders (an alumnus of a Stalinist kibbutz), and is on tenterhooks to see whether she is indicted or not for breaches of national security with her e-mails and dishonest testimony about them. With a following wind, the nomination is hers, but she will try to keep close enough to Obama to inherit his support, but far enough away not to carry his baggage for what has been, by widespread agreement, at least as disastrous a presidency as the second Bush experience.

The disagreeable facts are that both parties' machinery is largely in the clutches of the Clintons and the Bushes, but the underlying public has thinned markedly among Democrats, and fled altogether under the Republicans. The nearly 30 years of their combined ascendancy began on a whim of Reagan's, not a Bush triumph; and bifurcated into a dual dynasty because Bush Sr. managed to fragment his party for only the second time in its history, allowing the Clintons to set up shop as an alternate dynasty, or co-regency, of what remains a republic. (The Taft-Roosevelt split in 1912 was the other, and each of those was a serious president, not a crank like Perot.) They aren't real dynasties, they are incumbencies squatting like indifferent toads on both parties. With no disrespect to Mr. Bush, it was as if the ventriloquist, Ronald Reagan, retired in 1988, and the nearest replacement was his VP, who had never won a serious election, and had figuratively sat on Reagan's lap. He allowed the Reagan coalition to disintegrate. Clinton did not win a majority of votes, quickly lost the Congress to the Republicans, and allowed the presidency to be demeaned by impeachment for absurd indiscretions.

In the current campaign, Jeb Bush spent \$150 million, did not come close to winning a state, and ended up polling 7 percent in his home state of Florida, where he had been a good and popular governor. Hillary Clinton is barely ahead of Sanders, once the ex officio delegates who stampeded to Obama eight years ago

are deducted from the Clinton total. In both parties, the cadres of the organizations are far from the public's ideal candidate preferences.

Though they had their moments and are delightful men personally, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton were not great leaders, and the American public regards the era where they have presided as a failure, a terrible fall from the summit achieved with the satisfactory end of the Cold War. Clinton's tawdry dalliances and the Bushes' mangled syntax could be tolerated, but there have been three Middle Eastern wars, causing scores of thousands of casualties and trillions of dollars, and although the U.S. military has performed with distinction, the Western Alliance has withered, and almost nothing useful has been accomplished strategically except the eviction of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait and of al-Qaeda from Afghanistan. The ostensible beneficiary of much of this effort, Iraq, has been largely delivered to Iranian control, America's self-proclaimed mortal adversary, to whom Obama has given a green light to become a nuclear military power within ten years (or sooner if it wishes). The American middle class has stood still in buying power for 15 years, 60 percent of American families don't have \$1,000, scores of millions of low-wage jobs have gone while about 12 million unskilled peasants have entered the country illegally, tacitly tolerated by both parties under a lot of pious insipidities about "comprehensive immigration reform" (which is still awaited).

Donald Trump has entered a vortex and made it wider and deeper. It is clear from voting patterns that his assault on political correctness and his specific attacks on illegal immigration and trade deals that seem to have resulted in the exportation of unemployment to the U.S. – and on a feeble foreign policy that has effectively invited America's traditional friends and adversaries to change places – have pulled in very large numbers of Democrats and independents who had often not bothered to vote, so disgusted are they with current politics. It is unlikely that any other Republican could keep this harvest of voters, often called Reagan Democrats and essentially the working-class Democrats who, for varying reasons, crossed over to Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan. So shattered is the Bush hold that Jeb Bush was reduced to endorsing Ted Cruz, who is even more of an outsider than Trump. Cruz has a strong but not unlimited base among Evangelicals. He is proud of being a nasty former prosecutor, and is the master of dirty tricks and false allegations; there is some truth to Trump's frequent references to him as "Lyin' Ted." He is not a companionable figure, unlike

Donald Trump, and his constituency cannot win a Republican convention or a general election.

John Kasich could be a go-to candidate if Trump stalls before the 1,237-delegate total needed to nominate. The Bushies and their allies of convenience in the anti-Trump coalition are rewriting internecine delegation rules to set up as many obstacles as possible to a Trump majority, and if he falls short, his totals will quickly disintegrate. Kasich could come up in such a scenario, especially if he wins Pennsylvania and some other states to show that he is viable. But his disarming folksiness is almost as unpresidential as Trump's non-sentence formulations and Cruz's acoustically irritating misstatements. Kasich is a good meat-and-potatoes governor, but will walk off the Republican cliff with his policy of admitting any immigrant who shows up (even if Republicans can get past Kasich's exhortations to hug strangers in shopping malls and take a widow to dinner). In a hung convention, the list of potentially acceptable dark horses is a mystery – doubtless there are capable possibilities, but it is hard to identify one in these circumstances. Such a person could arise with astounding suddenness. If Trump, who seems likely to lose Wisconsin, can progress to a point where he does not react like a fighting bull to every goad from Cruz, and speaks cogently, and is receptive to that part of the rank and file who are not as angry as he is, he will win. But his ruminations to the *New York Times* on foreign policy gave his followers pause. The underlying sentiments were acceptable, and there were no self-destructive policy wounds, but he said “you know” more often than Caroline Kennedy in the interview that sank her candidacy for the U.S. Senate, and there were more non-sentences than sentences.

If Donald is cheated of the nomination, the Republicans will lose badly in November. If he makes no gestures of civility and does nothing to refine his message to the strata of the electorate who like a little more nuance and syntactical orthodoxy than Archie Bunker provides, it will be an unnecessarily disturbing election. If he follows the advice of his wife, Karl Rove, and many others (including this columnist), and banishes the contention that he is a crude and nasty know-nothing, he will win. The country wants to turn the page on the Bushes and the Clintons, but the voters have to have a believable and reasonably attractive sequel. It isn't Sanders or Cruz, but it still could be Trump.

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