

# Bernie Takes the Lead

He and the other candidates face a vicious fight for the right to lose to Trump.

by Conrad Black



**It is a little early** to become too declarative about this, but no one seems to have got much of a launch from Iowa and New Hampshire except, to a slight degree, Sanders, and he is still below 30 percent in all polls of Democrats that I've seen. It is starting to look like a Sanders–Bloomberg showdown, which essentially means a Bloomberg nomination, because the Democratic Party simply cannot nominate Sanders. He advocates compulsory, single-payer health care, national rent control, the Green Terror and government control of the energy industry, semi-open borders, a wealth tax, free university tuition, and free medical care for illegal migrants, with an open mind to reparations for African Americans and Native Americans. He claims that American society is “racist from top

to bottom" and he is a declared atheist with no apparent objection to live-birth abortion. Sanders can waffle and weasel, and doubtless will do so if he gets near the nomination, but he is lumbered with all this, and the United States will not buy into it under any currently imaginable circumstances. If the entire economic system broke down, as it did in the early 1930s, and the social safety net was exceptionally porous, a sharp left turn would be possible, but not an authoritarian revolutionary upheaval such as Bernie Sanders is touting and selling in the midst of this unprecedentedly broad economic boom.

Unless there is a sudden rush to Amy Klobuchar—and none is perceptible, and her resources are modest—Michael Bloomberg is the stop-Sanders candidate. What is afoot with him is the most brazen vote-buying exercise in the history of the world, and this will incur great resentment in a sophisticated electorate. Also, he is a relatively charmless candidate, in that aspect somewhat like Hillary Clinton. Sanders is a mad, raving, superannuated Marxist, but he has fought for pretty much the same thing all his life and has integrity, albeit in a completely unacceptable cause. An uncharming candidate can win only against a charmless candidate, as in George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis, and a charmless candidate can win only against a more charmless one, as in George W. Bush and Al Gore and John Kerry. Ronald Reagan was amiable, self-deprecating, courteous, decisive, sensible, and a hypnotic public speaker. Bill Clinton was a southern scoundrel with a twinkle in his eye, Barack Obama a suave and fluent champion of a great assault on an unjust racial barrier. And though Donald Trump horrifies and repulses millions of Americans, he is entertaining, overpowering, and a compelling force of nature to tens of millions of his countrymen, and most of his policies are faithful to his pre-electoral promises and have been successful.

Michael Bloomberg has already benignly suborned most of the

Democratic establishment through his philanthropies. There will be considerable public reticence about his pecuniary offensive, and television advertising, once familiar, holds more adherents than it makes converts; a presidential candidate is not a toilet cleanser or a remedy for the improvidences of aging. But Bloomberg is likely to emerge as the alternative to Sanders, which means that he will win, unless the Democrats are unsuspectedly on a general suicide mission. Sanders against Trump would have no parallel in American history; perhaps the closest would be Rufus King against James Monroe in 1816, when Monroe won 68 percent of the popular vote (a method used in about half the states) and 16 out of 19 states, and King's Federalists disappeared as a party. Unless the party establishment, who have been pretty comfortable with Bloomberg personally, can put all their chips now on Klobuchar or Buttigieg (and they would have even less chance of success against President Trump than would Bloomberg), Bloomberg will be the candidate.

If Bloomberg fizzles on Super Tuesday (March 3, when 15 states vote, including California and Texas), they will have to try with whichever of Klobuchar or Buttigieg has more legs to stop Sanders, presumably Klobuchar. But stopping both Sanders, the nightmare on the left, and Bloomberg's Wall Street-style semi-hostile takeover bid from the center will require stronger leadership and greater backroom skill than anyone in the bedraggled and legally handicapped Democratic National Committee appears to possess. More likely, a Bloomberg-Sanders fight to the finish will emerge after Super Tuesday, and Bloomberg's money will be stronger than the fervor of "the Bern." The Bloomberg candidacy, even fortified by a popular minority running mate, such as Michelle Obama, would then enter a far more intense and challenging campaign than the one it would already have won.

Here, Bloomberg would have three problems: (1) Trump's record is almost unassailable; (2) only his personality is

vulnerable, and only to about half the people, and Bloomberg is no pied piper of the American masses; and (3) Bloomberg would himself be carrying a good deal of baggage. Democrats could overlook the inelegant acquisition of their party, but the country would have a serious aversion to the sale of the White House. In such a scenario, about 40 percent of the Democrats would have gone down with Sanders; most would hold their noses and accept Bloomberg, but some of the Sanders following is more anti-establishment than Marxist, and Trump has some appeal to those people. Bloomberg is certainly not a racist and couldn't be portrayed as one, and the allegations of mistreating female employees are unlikely to amount to much. But he is essentially a gun confiscator, which to tens of millions of Americans means they can't defend themselves or their homes and it will be open season for those who should be addressed by the stop-and-frisk policy for which Bloomberg has so abjectly apologized. Bloomberg's faddish preoccupation with climate change will also not fly with the majority. No one outside New York cares about his record as mayor, so his chief credential would be as the alternative to Sanders.

But Bloomberg's biggest liability would be that he is an extremist in his hostility to Trump. He is the wealthiest member of the Resistance. Like most extreme movements, the anti-Trump Resistance (incorporating the Never Trumpers as well) is composed of followers, who are whipped up every week on some new pretext to abominate the president, and leaders, who know perfectly well that Trump is not a racist, misogynist, warmonger, or idiot, and did not collude with Russia or commit an impeachable offense with the Ukrainian president, but keep alleging these outrages for a variety of irrational and discreditable motives. Bloomberg is in that group, rather than in the large and respectable echelon of the country that finds Trump personally distasteful and will vote against him but without becoming overwrought about it. Bloomberg knows better than to call Trump a con-man, a fraud who isn't really wealthy, and a person of dangerous views, and

in the end, this will be a handicap.

The Democratic nominee will be supported by the Trump-haters of the Resistance, and if Bloomberg is the nominee, to run a strong race, he will have to win some votes away from Trump, because the president has enough to win now, against all comers combined. Bloomberg would have to convince millions of voters who aren't moved by personalities but want the best chief executive to desert Trump for Bloomberg. This will involve convincing them that he can improve on full employment and that African Americans, the non-university-educated, and the lowest 10 percent of income-earners, whose incomes are now all rising at more than twice the pace they did under Obama, would be better off with Bloomberg than with Trump. Bloomberg won't win by calling everyone who isn't a techno-star a dolt with inadequate quantities of "grey matter." Donald Trump has demonstrated that he knows the people better than any president since at least Bill Clinton, and probably Reagan, if not Franklin Roosevelt, and the Republican campaign will be very well financed. Candidate Bloomberg will not be able to contend with that by just opening wide both his wallet and the spigot of anti-Trump vitriol.

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