

Sanders and Trump, Coming on Strong in New Hampshire

Bernie Sanders was the big winner in Iowa, as he had, as he called it, a “virtual tie” with Hillary Clinton, and the Vermont senator has set himself a fine launch into the neighboring state of New Hampshire, where he should trounce Mrs. Clinton next week. The Republican night was toe-curlingly excruciating. Donald Trump did well, apart from the expectations of the refreshingly inaccurate polls in the last two weeks that he would win; it had been forecast until two weeks ago that the margin would be wider in favor of Ted Cruz than it was, 3 points and about 6,000 votes. Trump was courteous in his speech and entirely positive, and reasonably graciously managed to avoid any mention of the winner, and of the other candidates, apart from Mike Huckabee, whom he commended as he dropped out of the race. Cruz was fluent but began with a gratuitous reference to the Almighty and rattled on so loquaciously that the networks deserted him in mid-speech and went to Mrs. Clinton, who seized the moment but was prudent enough not to claim victory. Mrs. Clinton spoke well and was on message, but platitudinous even by the standards of early election-year result-night addresses, with her alert but worryingly slack-jawed husband behind her.

Bernie Sanders was quite good, and deserves great credit for being the only candidate to hint at the corrupt slime-pit of the American criminal-justice system that has turned the United States into a carceral prosecutocracy, in which indictments are effectively issued by sensational journalists of the Nancy Grace school of media lynching and undue lack of process. He also implied that he would just write off a trillion dollars of student loans, which, as the basic arithmetic indicates, would be a burdensome straw on the camel’s back in a country that under the Obama economic

miracle has doubled 233 years of accumulated American national debt in seven years, much of the increase in dubious bond sales to the central bank, a 100 percent subsidiary of the U.S. Treasury. Altruistic though his student-loan cancellation is, it is also a straight attempt to buy votes with the public's money; suspension of interest and phased reductions would be more seemly and affordable.

He also bit down hard on, and swallowed whole, the requirement for government-enforced reduction of carbon emissions, dismissing the substantial doubts about global warming as if they were the paid and orchestrated dissent of the oil industry (though he did not explicitly say that). What an irony it would be if the United States – which the international (including the American) Left falsely accused of conducting two wars against Iraq in pursuit of oil, though it did not gain one barrel of oil from either war – were now to discourage fossil-fuel consumption at immense cost to the public just as it narrowed toward zero its half-century of foreign-oil dependence. I am sure that, in its heart, the nation longs for someone endowed with some international strategic insight. I refuse to accept that I was the only television viewer afflicted by nostalgia for Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Harry Truman, and even George H. W. Bush, presidents and presidential candidates who knew how to link the national interest to world affairs, and did so in office very effectively. Among the candidates, Bernie Sanders is almost uniquely lacking in that quality. Not all international involvements are insane and not even Rand Paul suggests that they are.

Of the caucus-night speeches I heard, the grand prize for counter-effectiveness goes to Marco Rubio, who had a good night, coming just one point behind Donald Trump in third place for the Republicans. I cannot believe that the country really wanted 20 minutes from the third-place candidate on his view of God, his gratitude to his parents (a rather

commonplace sentiment, for obvious reasons), and his repeated encomia, with minor variations, to “the greatest country in human history.” The stature of the United States in the family of nations and on the canvas of history was not in dispute in this campaign and endless repetitions of the bumptious Fourth of July, small-town, Rotarian-meeting truisms are grueling for a national (and international) audience. Rubio is bucking to be the stop-Trump candidate, and seemed to strengthen his hand eight days before New Hampshire, where polls have had him running ahead of Cruz but well behind Trump. I suspect that the Trump lead in New Hampshire will lose some momentum as a result of his loss to Cruz, and I doubt if Cruz will gain much strength in New Hampshire, a state he has largely ignored. If Rubio had sounded more like a president, which at his best he is capable of doing, he might have put some blue water between himself and the other non-outsider candidates, Kasich, Bush, and Christie.

Now that the candidate-selection process has begun in earnest, the issue becomes, for the Republicans, who is the alternative to Donald Trump, and for the Democrats, do we really want to try the Clinton brand, which has been out there for a whole generation, once again without coming down a generation? This is (wronged) wife of Bill, not son or daughter of Bill, and Mrs. Clinton looks and sounds vigorous, but she isn't running for the first time for president. Bernie Sanders will almost certainly take her to the woodshed in New Hampshire, but the Democratic party simply cannot elevate a 75-year-old Vermont socialist who makes sense half the time but otherwise sounds and looks like an escapee from a rustic home for politicians too attenuated by pink cabin fever.

On the Republican side, it is hard to see Donald Trump's big lead in New Hampshire evaporating, although the polls in Iowa were almost all wildly off the mark. It is also hard to see the Iowa result giving Ted Cruz a huge boost in that state, and Cruz will not cut it generally by attributing his 28

percent poll-leading total to “courageous conservatives.” Everyone understands, and up to a point indulges, electoral hyperbole. But as most of the candidates seem to recognize, especially the outsiders (Trump, Sanders, Carson, and Cruz himself), after 20 years of corruption, belligerence from George W. Bush (when he should have been less impetuous), appeasement from Obama (when he should have been more forceful), fiscal incontinence from both, and a sclerotic and often contemptible bipartisan inter-branch leadership group, this is no time for Rubionic boosterism or the inanities of the theory that a vote for me and the nation jumps from P. T. Barnum’s nation of suckers to a Tocquevillean paradise.

In the jaded and jaundiced circumstances of a debt-ridden, floundering America with a middle class straining with stagnant real income and maxed-out credit cards, and the less advantaged scores of millions so anxious they come out in February in Iowa to vote for Cruz, Trump, and Sanders, this is no time for “our best days are ahead of us.” It is a time for a Lincoln who understands the problem, an FDR or Reagan who seems to know where to start and can uplift the people and at least knows how to lead America across the Francis Scott Key Bridge. In the absence of a great orator like those three, where Rubio stands out as fluent, but forgettable – like (Bill) Clinton and Obama – the country may turn to a person of substantive accomplishment. Sanders is too flaky to be elected, though it is hard not to like him. Hillary is carrying more baggage than the pack donkey in her party’s emblem.

Trump might make it if he becomes less unserious when precise policy suggestions are required; he is very intelligent and politically intuitive and should not be underestimated. Cruz is very intelligent and can speak well, but in the end he will scare even the majority of Republicans with his gun-loving, televangelical hard edge, a nasty elitist masquerading as a populist in his pick-up truck with a bazooka in the rear

window. Rubio should have propelled himself forward from Iowa, but his reaction to his comparative success was a failure. He had less right to congratulate himself on his third-place finish than Bill Buckley had to give his magnificent "victory speech" when he ran third in the mayoral election in New York in 1965. ("Your achievement, in winning thirteen percent of the vote in the most liberal city in the world, will not go unnoticed in Albany, in Washington, or in Moscow," he told his supporters. Nelson Rockefeller, Lyndon Johnson, and Leonid Brezhnev seemed to be unimpressed, but it was a great speech.) Rubio had his third-place moment on Monday night and bloviated, thanked God, his parents, and his wife, and sounded like an H. L. Mencken parody dismembering a candidate for alderman in fin-de-siècle (white) Baltimore. He was less a president than an irritating voice box repeating the same ghastly canned rubbish every time a coin of any denomination bearing the likeness of a great president is inserted in it.

Incredibly, the *New York Times*, which endorsed McGovern in 1972, expected Reagan to be defeated in 1984, and is utterly unqualified to opine knowledgeably or fair-mindedly on internecine Republican affairs, may have got it right in endorsing John Kasich. He has staked everything on New Hampshire and is running fairly strongly there, and is supported by the Sununu machine. He has been a successful governor in a large and difficult state (Ohio), and was a very respected nine-term congressman, who served for a time as ranking Republican on the armed-forces and budget committees. There is something in New Jersey governor Chris Christie's snide reference to senators as people who talk, while governors actually have a serious administrative job, and he and Kasich and Jeb Bush and Mike Huckabee and Scott Walker have all been good governors. Christie had his chance when opportunity knocked and he passed. That caller doesn't knock twice. Fort Lee killed him as president. And if he rose in the polls, the country would want to know why he apparently failed Mitt Romney's ethics test as a vice-presidential candidate.

Personally, as a foreigner, but someone with some experience of these things, I would never trust a prosecutor in the system Bernie Sanders rightly derides as draconian (a flattering upgrade on the facts), and especially one from a state where, as the old saying goes, "You know there's a recession in New Jersey when the Mafia is laying off judges." (The shared pride of Christie and Cruz at having been "tough prosecutors" should warn off any sensible voters about their fitness for the greatest office within the gift of any people on earth. At least Thomas E. Dewey convicted real criminals, and even he lost twice, to better candidates.)

Starting next Wednesday, the Republicans who don't want Donald Trump will have to choose an alternative. Kasich, somewhat homely though he is, is qualified and reasonable and, all in all, probably the best of the alternatives, and would make it a good race. If Trump wins easily in New Hampshire and the opposition to him remains fragmented, he will win, and any recognizable Republican should win in November. As I have written here before, I am relaxed about a Trump victory and think he would be a good president, especially with a little stylistic fine tuning. But there is a large body of opinion that is unconvinced and it deserves a strong representative. John Kasich is the best alternative on offer and would make it a good race for the nomination, and would assure the country of a good Republican candidate either way.

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