

The Season of U.S. Discontent

The peculiarity of the American political scene now is a profound revulsion against the more than 20 years of misgovernment the country has suffered, from both parties and in all three branches. For the first time in living memory, and probably in the history of the country, the United States has endured four consecutive terms of objectively unsuccessful government from the White House. And the latter Clinton years were far from superlative also, with the generation of the housing bubble through executive orders to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, legislated non-commercial mortgages, and artificially low interest rates that plowed the nation's savings into unaffordable and speculative housing.

It is not the novelty it is often claimed that outsiders Donald Trump, Ben Carson, and Carly Fiorina are doing well, as there is a tradition of distinguished or at least eminent people running for the presidency as their first elective or even civilian governmental office. Traditionally, this role has usually been played by military heroes. This is a custom unique to America among advanced and politically sophisticated countries. In all parliamentary countries, incoming leaders are politically fairly well traveled, and even in France, where presidents are not necessarily former legislators, they are generally politically familiar figures and holders of previous high public or at least visible political office.

This sudden prominence of previously non-political figures follows on the great American tradition of elevating prominent military officers; this practice has lapsed, as there have not been as many, or as popular, wars recently (though General Colin Powell could almost certainly have been nominated for president, had he wished it, after the Gulf War). Washington, Jackson, both Harrisons, Taylor, Pierce, Grant, Hayes, Garfield, and Eisenhower were prominent generals, and William McKinley a much decorated Union Army major and Theodore

Roosevelt a famous colonel. Among unsuccessful nominees for president who were military heroes were General Lewis Cass (1848); the first presidential candidate of the Republican party, the adventurer Colonel John C. Fremont (1856); one of the generals Lincoln fired as union commander before elevating Grant and Sherman, General George B. McClellan (1864); and both General Winfield Scott, hero of the Mexican War and author of the strategic plan for Union victory in the Civil War (1852), and his unrelated namesake, General Winfield Scott Hancock (1880). In 19 of the 23 elections from 1824 to 1912, at least one of the presidential candidates was a former senior officer and war hero. There have been a few civilian first-time politicians as presidential challengers too, including newspaper publisher Horace Greeley (1872) and utility chairman, lawyer, and public intellectual Wendell Willkie (1940). Even the erratic billionaire Ross Perot won a sizeable enough share of votes in 1992 (nearly 20 million votes, and 19 percent of the total), to throw the election from George H. W. Bush to Bill Clinton. Seen in this context, the rise of Donald Trump and the others is not so surprising.

It is also remarkable that those candidates continue to do so well given that the people they are contesting with in the Republican party are not the sort of people who have so demoralized and misgoverned America. Jeb Bush, Chris Christie, Mike Huckabee, and John Kasich have all had impressive records as governors, and Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Rand Paul have been formidable senators. They are not in the slightest reminiscent of the implausible parade of self-destructive political ragamuffins that challenged Mitt Romney for the Republican nomination four years ago: Michele Bachmann, Rick Perry, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Santorum. In elevating Trump, Carson, and Fiorina (who ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate in 2010), the Republicans are punishing the innocent, though that is not to imply that the three beneficiaries of the search for blameless people are without merit for the aptitudes they do possess.

Donald Trump (disclosure – a friend of many years) has combined an Archie Bunker talent at blunt, earthy, and amusing reductionism with a spectacular business career as a quality builder and developer and a popular success as a television personality. And Dr. Carson and Mrs. Fiorina are very accomplished in their fields and articulate and outspoken critics of much of what is not working in American public policy. Recent polls in the generally Democratic state of Pennsylvania show all three political newcomers, as well as Senator Rubio, leading Hillary Clinton. The desire for new faces is not just a partisan impulse; the country knows it has been poorly served, and even sweeping changes, as when Newt Gingrich, Nancy Pelosi, and John Boehner were elevated to the position of Speaker of the House, or when Bill Clinton and Barack Obama were elected to the presidency, have not produced a discernible improvement in the level of public political contentment.

It has been fashionable to predict the early demise of these outsider candidacies, which, of course, has not happened. My suspicion is that Trump's combination of straight-talking billionaire and television personality will continue to work for him. But his tendency to make excessively ungracious remarks will strike many as unpresidential. Rosie O'Donnell won't generate much sympathy, but attacking Megyn Kelly, Rich Lowry, and the appearance of Mrs. Fiorina implies a tendency to incivility that will offend many. In person, Donald is a gracious and generous man and a wonderful raconteur. His wife, Melania, if she would accept the limelight, would be a great asset.

I don't see any reason that Carson or Fiorina should fold; they are both very intelligent and articulate and have had interesting careers and appeal to large natural constituencies that the Democrats have tended to dominate. But as the number of candidates thins, the competitive position of the surviving political veterans, especially Rubio and, if he can get on

track, Jeb Bush, will make it a more gripping horse race than it has been, and, though predictions are hazardous, the narrow probability is that one of the practiced politicians will be the presidential nominee and one of the newcomers the vice-presidential nominee.

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Americans are not in the habit of imagining that Canadian elections have much relevance to the U.S. However, as Americans do generally believe that Canadians are indistinguishable from Americans from northern states, apart from the French Canadians concentrated in Quebec, there may be some claim by the Democrats that the shift from the Conservatives to the Liberals may presage a trend among English-speaking North Americans, or a leftward trend in the West generally. Any such theory is bunk.

Almost the only distinguishing Canadian linguistic traits are the different pronunciations of syllables containing the adjoining vowels "ou" as in "out," which Canadians do not pronounce to rhyme with "cow," but more flatly. It is a much subtler acoustical distinction than exists between New Englanders and Texans, or Kansans and most people from New York City. There are, however, greater differences between the nationalities. Canadian non-Caucasians, apart from native people, are almost all immigrants or descendants of immigrants who came to Canada voluntarily, as there was no economic rationale for the use of slave labor in agricultural work in a northern climate – it was more efficient only in tropical agriculture, such as cotton or tobacco farming, and slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1829, nearly 40 years before Canada became an independent country. Canada did have a good record in receiving and welcoming more than 40,000 fugitive slaves in that period, and was the temporary residence of many leaders of the U.S. anti-slavery movement, including John Brown and Harriet Tubman, who professed to be a Canadian in the 1850s, and Josiah Henson, the model for Uncle

Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's astoundingly successful novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which sold the unheard-of total of over 2 million copies in the first decade after its publication in 1852. The non-whites in Canada are less than 20 percent of the population, and of those only about a sixth are black and the rest are divided approximately equally among East Asians, South Asians, and Middle Easterners, and none of these groups votes, so far as can be identified, in a bloc for one party or another.

This is a complicated issue, and not one of unlimited interest to the average [New English Review] reader, but the ejection of Canada's Conservative government, even by a generally more liberal electorate than that of the U.S., was a rejection of the personality of the prime minister, Stephen Harper, and of his hardball wedge campaign. More remarkable, and quite encouraging, was the near collapse of the socialist New Democrats (hardly new after more than 50 years), who were dumped as the official opposition, as Quebec moved from the left to the center. The Canadian election does not carry much of a message for Americans, because it did not imply a rejection of Harper's low-tax economic policy or his robust support of Israel and Ukraine. It may be a partial victory for environmentalists, and in Canada as elsewhere, the old left, routed and discredited after the Reagan-Thatcher victory in the Cold War, has taken over the ecological-activist movement and now marches in tandem, not with the toiling masses of the world, but with the former Sierra Club devotees and the bicyclists with butterfly nets.

There is little of the political disillusionment in Canada that now afflicts the United States. Canada balanced the federal budget 14 years in a row, and doesn't lead the West into Middle Eastern wars – it cooperated wholeheartedly in expelling Saddam from Kuwait, but passed altogether on the second Iraq War, and has made only a token contribution to the alliance of opponents of ISIS. Canadians tired of a leader

after nine years (a longer time in office than any American president except FDR), but do not feel particularly misgoverned. Over that period, Canada has had prudent and unexceptionable government. It hasn't been exciting, but the lack of excitement included the avoidance of any significant insolvencies in the financial sector or incontinent increases in the money supply, such as have afflicted the U.S. in 2008 and subsequently. The three main parties, moderate right, centrist, and moderate left, like much of life in Canada, produced, by American standards, a rather tepid campaign; very few prominent commentators are identified as far to the right or left, and media political discourse rarely takes on the recent and current American formula of diametrically opposed people shrieking epithets at each other.

No one in the U.S. should claim to find any tea leaves worth examining for American purposes in the Canadian election. The fate of Harper, like that of Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl, reminds us that only American leaders, constitutionally barred from a third term, leave office in good physical and political health (Eisenhower, Reagan, arguably Clinton). On the other hand, the one time a U.S. president sought a third term, Roosevelt in 1940, the whole future of democracy in the world depended on his winning it. It is easier to dispense with a dispensable leader, even a distinguished one, than to retain an indispensable leader at a critical time.

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