

This is how democracy is supposed to work

by Conrad Black

The American election has now become so absurd and outrageous that we are fully into the season of unctuous hand-wringing that the presidency has been mortally wounded as a place of moral and political leadership and that the country is inexorably politically dysfunctional and debased. All the talk and scribbling about Donald Trump having damaged presidential politics permanently is bunk. In the first place, the Democrats are the chief mud-slingers, because they can't claim to be the party of change and can't accept responsibility for the present miserable state of the country. Even more absurd are the pompous British semi-highbrow arguments that the U.S. is undermining democracy in the world. Lawless, fatuous, and often disgusting though it is, this campaign is democracy; the people chose the candidates and will choose the president.

What has happened is both less alarming and less surprising than this conventional wisdom implies. The United States has rarely been the Tocquevillian idyll of Norman Rockwell families in Grandma Moses communities that is the collective self-image that Walt Disney and others have generally portrayed and that even millions of Americans who know better assume is how scores of millions of their fellow citizens live. The United States survived a civil war that killed almost 10 per cent of its adult free males, the world wars, Great Depression, the upheavals of McCarthyism and the Red Scare in the Fifties, the race riots and Vietnam war strains of the Sixties, the Watergate debacle in the Seventies.

My contention, which I have published here before, is that the Watergate affair, by promoting the criminalization of policy differences and tearing down one of the most effective

administrations in American history for no good reason, has discouraged unknowable numbers of talented and upright Americans from entering the public life of their country. There was certainly a criminal conspiracy to obstruct an investigation in 1972-74 in parts of the Nixon White House staff and Republican National Committee, but there has never been any conclusive evidence that Richard Nixon himself had anything to do with it.

The administration that withdrew the 545,000 draftees that were in Vietnam when it entered office (with 200-400 coming home dead every week) and preserved a non-communist government in Saigon, that ended school segregation and avoided court-ordered use of school buses to move tens of millions of children out of their school districts arbitrarily, that opened relations with China, signed the greatest arms control agreement in history, began a Middle East peace process, abolished the draft, reduced the crime rate, and founded the Environmental Protection Agency, was torn down for no justifiable reason and the national media have never ceased since to congratulate themselves for that and for ensuring the cut-off of all assistance to South Vietnam.

There has been a decline in the quality of candidates for national office (president and vice-president), and a corresponding decline in the sagacity and probity of those at the head of the federal government. When the last two-full-term president before Ronald Reagan, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, retired, the system elevated two extremely capable and qualified contenders to succeed him: John F. Kennedy and Nixon. When Reagan retired in 1988, George H.W. Bush rode his coat-tails into office against a person whose name is now a trivia question: Michael Dukakis. Bush allowed his party to be fragmented by the cranky billionaire Ross Perot and fumbled the presidency to Bill Clinton, who, with his wife, would not otherwise have been well-known outside Arkansas. The greatest offices in the country have been handed around and among the

Bushes and Clintons since then and now they are together against Donald Trump.

Hillary Clinton, though she would probably be an improvement on the recent past, represents continuity of what has been the most catastrophic 20 years of misgovernment in American history. She was there, as first lady, senator, secretary of state, or candidate, for the housing bubble and Great Recession, the terrible drain of Middle East war that delivered most of Iraq to Iran and produced a colossal humanitarian tragedy, the doubling of the national debt in seven years to produce one per cent annual economic growth while 15 million people dropped out of the work force, and the terrible fiascoes of the abandoned red line in Syria and the cave-in to Iranian nuclear military ambitions with a fig leaf of (unverifiable) deferral. But she is an able person, still carrying the torch of feminism, and she isn't Trump.

This is why what is happening is not surprising: she represents the continuity of misgovernment that has angered and frightened Americans; a sure recipe for defeat, except that the alternative is so radical a change of pace and personality he gives the forces of change pause. Trump's strength is that he has never sought public office, elected or otherwise and has brilliantly made himself the evocator and the voice of all Americans who are outraged at what has been done to their country. Beginning shortly after the greatest and most bloodless victory in the history of the nation state – the triumph of the West, under the leadership of the United States in the Cold War – the United States gives every appearance of having become a nation of idiots incapable, as Trump points out with endearing zest, of doing anything right. He has the weakness of his strengths and the fault of his qualities. And the Democrats cannot run on their record, as two thirds of the American people think the country has been going in the wrong direction for years, so the only path to re-election is through attacking Trump personally.

He is not at all the sociopath that is claimed, or even the boor he sometimes seems. Personally, his conversation is a good deal less coarse than Hillary Clinton's, and his demeanour is more equable. But he is a vintage American blowhard. This has sometimes extended to locker-room, towel-snapping bravura, and the Democrats have levered on that to claim that he is a sexist, a racist, and now, a molester of vulnerable females. One side parades the female accusers of Bill Clinton and the other complainants against Trump who stayed silent for decades. Hillary Clinton is compulsively untruthful. She was effectively accused by the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, under oath, of having repeatedly lied, under oath. The Clinton Foundation, which only distributes seven per cent of its income, has received generous gifts from those seeking the favours of the State Department. The Clintons had a net worth of zero when they left office and now they have from \$150 million to \$200 million. Where does anyone suppose the money came from?

This is a uniquely tawdry presidential race because one candidate is culturally offensive to half the people, but is the only alternative to a person who has serious problems with probity and is a continuation of a sleazy and broken-down system that a majority wants changed drastically. The price of change is Donald and the cost of avoiding Donald is Hillary. So it is not surprising that the campaign has plumbed the depths it has, and that the match is so negative. Nor is it, in the long term, alarming.

Trump is not a racist; he just dislikes Muslim terrorists and illegal migrants. He is not a misogynist; he just expresses his sexual appreciation of them crudely, as men (and women) often do. Some of his coarseness was tactical, to energize and bring out immense numbers of lower-income, limited education yahoos who don't normally vote. Some of it is his dislike of political correctness, and some part of his nature is emotional immaturity and hyper-sensitivity. It doesn't remind

anyone of Washington or Lincoln, but it doesn't make it more likely that he will blow up the world. He would, as a talented and historically bipartisan deal-maker, get the give-and-take system with the Congress working again and get it past the recent impasse between the use of unconstitutional executive orders and constant threats to shut down the government. Clinton would flat-line the economy and enthrone political correctness, but she would probably be a competent president. And Trump and Clinton did, between them, defend the political centre from the right-wing loopy Ted Cruz and the semi-Marxist Bernie Sanders.

This is not the end of America or a serious blow to democracy. Either of these two candidates will be better than many U.S. past presidents and than most of the other current leaders of important countries. Vulgar though it is, if this campaign wasn't an engrossing spectacle, we wouldn't bother watching it.