

Trump Looks Solid for 2020

He keeps getting stronger as the Democratic field grows more dismal.

by Conrad Black



Most of the elements are now in place for a decisive electoral victory for the current president, and a clear mandate to drain the swamp of all that he ran against. It is aberrant that with the economy performing at historic levels, and international relations steadied and easing toward a more satisfactory relationship with China and North Korea, the president's approval ratings are in the upper forties rather than the low sixties. He is about where President Obama was at this point in his presidency, but Obama had not been successful; all he had done was Obamacare, and it was already seen by the country as being far from a comprehensive or optimal solution to the shortcomings of the American health-care dilemma.

Trump, by contrast, has taken a flatlined economy, where middle-class and working-class purchasing power had not moved in nearly 20 years, the work force was shrinking, and GDP per capita growth was down to 1 percent and not accruing to the lower two-thirds of the population at all, and produced over 3 percent income growth for all socioeconomic echelons. The country now has more positions to fill than unemployed people, and the unemployment rate is down to the level of 1969, a figure that was appreciably reduced by having 550,000 draftees in Vietnam.

Even if existing trends continue, this president will probably do better than Obama did in winning his second term in 2012. Inept though he was after the first debate, Mitt Romney will almost certainly have been a stronger candidate than whoever emerges from the mountainous scrum of mediocrities, cranks, and tired geriatrics contending for the Democratic nomination now. There are no surprise candidates left in the wings; the only new face who has gained ground is Mayor Peter Buttigieg, and he is not a serious nominee for more than a rise to senator or governor or, on a stretch, vice president.

The veterans, Sanders and Biden, are more old-hat, *vieux jeu*, than ever. We all get older, but Sanders is just as vapidly socialist and innumerate as ever, and Biden is the same old amiable stumblebum we remember. China is our friend, he says; 83 per cent of Americans, he seems not to understand, have received tax cuts, not just the rich Democrats in Wall Street, Hollywood, and Silicon Valley. Either of them could stir up a bit of enthusiasm for the proverbial "last hurrah" (Edwin O'Connor's novel and the subsequent film about legendary Boston mayor and Massachusetts governor James Michael Curley), but the idea of either of them actually defeating this president, with this president's record, is nonsense. It would be, as in the novel and the film (starring the always outstanding Spencer Tracy), a sentimental roundup for a politician who had tried one time too many for high office.

Their time and appeal are outdated, but they may be judged to have earned the chance.

Bernie Sanders claims to be the cutting edge of the future, the prophet now being honored by the rallying of the swarm of his younger rivals to many of his radically left ideas from his 2016 campaign, when he lost fairly narrowly to Hillary Clinton. There is some truth to that, but they are all charging to the end of a cul-de-sac. The “environmental revolution” that Sanders promises is bunk; it is just a Marxist adherence to the formerly reputable opposition to pollution that led Lyndon Johnson to clean up the Great Lakes and Richard Nixon to found the Environmental Protection Agency, mutated into an assault on capitalism in the spurious claim of saving the planet.

The rest of his platform is just a cynical proposal of vote-acquisition by taking money from people who have earned it and redistributing it to people who have not, practically regardless of merit: forgive \$1 trillion of student loans, socialize medicine (trillions more), and pile the cost onto anyone who earns over \$200,000 a year. The American *raison d'être* and national mythos that hard work and intelligence can lead to the summit of American life, including the White House, is replaced by the deadening, leveling hand of Karl Marx: from each according to his means, to each according to his needs. It is a non-starter in America, a formula for electoral suicide. (Sanders’s views on legal and penal reform have great merit, but he is never going to get far enough to enact them.)

Joe Biden is the alternative. The younger candidates are in a disorderly footrace to the left and are generally almost even with Sanders in policy terms. Kamala Harris wants a “conversation” about every point that she has not resolved (which is most of them), in order not to close the door on even the most fatuous and extreme proposals. Beto O’Rourke, despite the CNN rogue poll that he would defeat Donald Trump

by 11 per cent, remains an arm-flapping airhead with no traction, sinking without a ripple beneath the waves, where Kirsten Gillibrand and many of the others, including the egregious little attack dog Eric Swalwell, have preceded him. Cory Booker, an earnest but verbose and vacuous man, remains afloat with a life vest but is going nowhere. Elizabeth Warren has also walked off the dock, and only her native headdress is still visible. In these circumstances, the party grandees, along with the majority of sensible rank and file, who would rather lose with honor and in a way that maintains the party's tradition, will presumably put Biden in as nominee and offer one of the radical younger people as vice president. It won't fly, and Trump will win easily, probably by about 15 million votes.

There is a tradition in American politics that drives both parties, at lengthy intervals, especially in a year when they are unlikely to win anyway, to let the radical streak take over and give it a try, just to get it out of their system. That is what happened to the Republicans with Goldwater in 1964 and with the Democrats in 1972 with McGovern, and the incumbents, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, won those elections with over 60 percent of the vote. My guess is that Biden will be elevated over Sanders, and he will try an instant de-aging and hands-across-the-barricades move with some radical-left vice-presidential candidate, such as the fluent and attractive congresswoman from Hawaii, Tulsi Gabbard. (Something must be done to reassure the American people that the true political face of the Aloha State is not the bilious and almost incomprehensible Senator Maisie Hirono. Every time she opens her mouth, the world's estimation of Hawaii sinks.)

Barring an economic downturn, the Trump reelection campaign will move into a smoother, more suave and conciliatory phase. He has invited agreement on infrastructure, and first indications are positive. Legal matters will take their

course, and the Clinton campaign and the Obama Justice Department and intelligence services will take a very spectacular, painful, and well-deserved trip to the woodshed. To raise his victory from the Obama 2012 level to that of Johnson in 1964 and Nixon in 1972, he should move into the careful mode of tweet restraint, conciliatory gestures, and the assurance of a confident president who no longer has a partisan leopard on his back. The partisan media are finally becoming more subtle. Bob Woodward has expressed concern about spying on the Trump campaign; CNN commentators are sometimes even-handed, as in Jake Tapper's questioning why Senator Klobuchar gave Trump no credit for the economy's good health.

The end of the Mueller episode, a Democratic chimera and Trump nightmare, opens the way to partisan de-escalation. The desperate nonsense of Jerry Nadler and Adam Schiff can easily be bypassed. The country wants a restoration of dignity, and the president must lead the way. He behaved with exemplary discretion and consideration in the Kavanaugh/Ford stage of the Supreme Court confirmation hearings, when one misplaced word would have blown the process up in a puff. Now is the time for more of the same, which he can provide from a position of strength. The only argument left to the Democrats, that he's not fit to be president, is the easiest of all to debunk. As this process of de-escalation takes its course, the president should commute the sentences of all nonviolent federal first offenders who have served half or more of their sentences, and tangibly encourage the states to do the same. It is the right thing to do, to ameliorate the evils of the incomparably severe American criminal-justice system, and it would win the votes of millions of nonwhite victims of the appallingly punitive and rigged system, and millions of white families also. Over 100 million Americans are in families who have been afflicted by the wickedness and severity of the American justice system. They are ready to vote for a reforming president.

President Trump can turn a likely clear win into a mighty landslide. I believe he will do it.

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