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Anger, the Race for the Presidency and US Foreign Policy

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, FEB 21 2016

The American electorate is angry and in search of change. The people who were the main candidates of the main parties at the beginning of this very long presidential nomination and election campaign are now in serious trouble, or out. Hillary Clinton, the wife of a former president, recently Secretary of State and early odds on favorite to win is being beaten or tied in the first Democratic Party caucuses and primaries by Senator Bernie Sanders who wasn't a member of the party until last year. Jeb Bush, the son of one president and the brother of another, was the leading candidate for the Republican Party nomination when the campaign started, but has been marginalised by Donald Trump, a billionaire developer, and reality TV star, who was thought to be a Democrat until he announced for the presidency.

Sanders is a very cranky, self-proclaimed socialist, running against America's millionaires and billionaires whom he claims rig the economy by financing politicians and elections in order to gain favorable policies from government. Very popular among college students and recent graduates—the new debtor class—Sanders promises free tuition and a “revolution” which is intended to reverse the growing income inequality that exists in American, the product, he says, of the rigged economy. Hillary Clinton has picked up the theme, but seems a bit less credible on the topic than Sanders given he raises campaign money in small donations over the internet and she gathers lots of money from the very Wall Street donors Sanders rants against. Her main appeal within the party is that she will be the first female president, having lost the nomination last time to the first black president.

Trump is happy to claim billionaire status as boasting about his success as a “winner” is central to his campaign “to make America great again, a winner again.” He enjoys the privileges of success – flying around in his own jetliner, giving tours of his helicopter at campaign events, and proclaiming that he is beholden to no one because he is self-funding his own campaign. Much of that campaign so far been devoted to attacking illegal immigrants, wondering about the trustfulness of Muslims, and disparaging reporters and his opponents, especially the manliness of Jeb Bush, whom he calls “low energy” among other things, and the honesty and sanity of Ted Cruz, the Senator from Texas. Jeb is out of the campaign. Cruz is doing better because he has a base among the evangelical voters, but is still a distant second.

It is a bizarre campaign and could get even more so. Michael Bloomberg, a somewhat cranky billionaire who is the former mayor of New York City, has threatened to enter the race as an independent if Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders become their party nominees. Bloomberg who was a Democrat but ran first as a Republican and then as an Independent in his campaigns for mayor. Although he is thought of as an effective and popular mayor, Bloomberg is not without controversy as he lead a strange effort to ban super-sized soft drinks in the city, is rabidly anti-gun, and took a third term as mayor by essentially bribing his way past a law limiting mayors to two terms. Some think it is fortunate that third party candidates have never won the presidency.

But the story of the election is the anger, particularly on the Republican side. Bernie Sanders' anger against the system intrigues the young who want to man the barricades before taking corporate jobs and the old who long for the 1960s when it was the Vietnam War that they were fighting against. Money will never leave politics just as war will never leave international relations. Republican anger is not that of people on the make who feel bad about their

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motives, but that of people who are losing. Many lower middle and working class whites in America feel desperate as their jobs are lost to imports and immigrants. Alcohol and drugs are cutting into this population. They see the system as rigged to favor minorities and those with government jobs. Trump appeals to them because he is politically incorrect in language, attacking Mexicans, Muslims, and the media, is against free trade—those foreigners who have stolen American jobs— and appears to be a self-made billionaire and tough guy, a winner.

Foreign policy does not play much of a role in the campaign, but being Commander-in-Chief does. To be sure, both Sanders and Trump have come out being against the Iraq War. (Interestingly, no one talks about the Afghanistan War.) Hillary Clinton cannot do the same as she actually voted for the invasion when she was a senator. Sanders, Trump, and others have also complained about the propensity to become involved in other people's civil wars. And no one promotes nation building which has become a foreign policy bad idea. Of course, Republicans like to bash Obama so there are claims that American influence in the world is on the decline and the America is neglecting its allies. But all the candidates say ISIS must be crushed and that the US has to lead a coalition, usually featuring Muslim troops, to do this. Given that is essentially current US policy, there really isn't much controversy here or much political leverage to be had by focusing on ISIS or Syria in the campaign for the presidency.

Being qualified to be Commander-in-Chief is another thing. Not one of the candidates for the presidency has served a day in the US military. Hillary Clinton has an advantage on the Commander-in-Chief issue in that she was secretary of state for four years and thus privy to the nation's deepest security plans. She often cites her advocacy for the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, but tends to downplay her even larger role in the killing of Gaddafi in Libya. (She once proudly said: we came, we saw, he died.) As Bernie Sanders cut his political teeth protesting the Vietnam War, he would be an unlikely Commander-in-Chief. The Republicans make up for their lack of military experience by promising to expand significantly the military budget. Their lament, working a common Republican theme, is that the Democrats have weakened America's power and standing in the world. Their tough talk is their credential for being Commander-in-Chief.

Trump is the one to watch. In debates, he showed that he has almost no knowledge of the details of security and foreign policy. This lack of knowledge will surely draw the most attention as he moves forward for it will make some fear Trump assuming command of America's vastly powerful and very complex military and intelligence apparatus. Near the president at all times is an officer with access to the nuclear codes. But Trump's bluster appeals to others, giving him in their eyes the tough guy image in any setting – America's Putin.

The national security bureaucracy hems in any president, shaping the policy options and guiding implementation. No one should expect US foreign policy to be significantly different under any of the candidates currently running, even Bernie Sanders. Obama wanted to end his wars, but ended up approving a surge in Afghanistan, the return of American troops to Iraq, bombing in several countries, and supporting a constant drone assassination campaign that spans continents. But the national security bureaucracy also accepts its ultimate subordination to civilian authority embodied in the president as Commander-in-Chief. It will be a very big shock indeed to have the untrained, uninhibited, and unexpected President Donald Trump in that role.

It is democracy at work. Not what the billionaires want. Just what one billionaire and a lot of angry people want.

About the author:

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