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# The Apotheosis of Donald J. Trump

Thomas B. Edsall JULY 21, 2016

As we take a step back and contemplate the actuality of Donald J. Trump's nomination as the Republican candidate for president, one aspect of the situation stands out. Virtually the entire political class, Republicans and Democrats, knows Trump's liabilities in extraordinary detail.

The constitutional structure of American government forces politicians, no matter what their motives, to feel constrained to say and do the right thing according to the Constitution whether or not they are sincere," Jeffrey Tulis, a professor of history at the University of Texas, wrote me.

But Trump, according to Tulis, is unique in that no other previous major party presidential candidate has felt so unconstrained by these constitutional norms."

In fact, the separation of powers under the Constitution was explicitly designed to prevent the usurpation of power by a political leader appealing to popular passions and prejudices. If the framers saw anything coming, it was exactly this: a demagogue in the true sense of the term, someone with a privileged background pretending to be a man of the people, channeling their grievances. In other words, a Trump-like candidate.

Trump's acceptance of the nomination tonight reflects the capitulation of the venerable Republican Party, which has proved unable to protect either its traditions or its principles.

“There has never been a major-party nominee quite like Trump; no party has gone over the edge in the way the Republicans are about to,” Mason Williams, a professor of history at Williams College, wrote by email:

Constraints that would have prevented the nomination of a candidate like Trump have been removed “by party and ideological polarization; by the weakening of the political parties as organizations; and by the fact that primary voters, rather than party bosses or even more ideologically oriented party activists, now have the power to choose the Republican nominee. In the past, party organizations were strong enough to filter out contenders as aberrant as Trump. Evidently, no longer.”

No previous nominee has been so much the creation of social media and so little the creation of a political party.

Trump's violation of ethical and business norms are available for all to see. (For an exhaustive and informative compendium, see the Atlantic's recent summary, “The Many Scandals of Donald Trump: A Cheat Sheet.”)

While Haley Barbour, a former Republican National Committee chairman, called it a “nothingbuger,” allegations that on the opening night of the convention Melania Trump plagiarized a Michelle Obama speech reinforced the image of Trump and his family as duplicitous. Michael Murphy, a former supporter of Jeb Bush, called the mood among Republican operatives on Tuesday morning “something between grim resignation and the Donner Party.”

Perhaps most important is the acquiescence of the Republican Party and of a large segment of the voting public to Trump's flagrant disregard for democratic procedure in politics and governing.

“What seems to me most distinctive about Trump,” Daniel Rodgers, professor emeritus of history at Princeton, wrote in response to my inquiry:

is not his determination to close the doors to immigration (that has all too many precedents in the American past), or his criticism of open world-trade agreements (that, too, is closer to the historical norm of U.S. policy than is commonly imagined), or the barely disguised racism (which was his entry, via the Birther movement, into national politics).

What is most distinctive is the strongman, authoritarian style of politics that he radiates so strongly both in the bigger-than-life-or-politics persona he projects and the trust-me, Iâ€™ll fix everything and make us great again, program he promises.

Capitalizing on legitimate discontent, Trump is both the exploiter and the beneficiary of stagnating median household income, declining productivity and gross domestic product growth, as well as a worldwide refugee and immigration crisis.

Economic issues are arguably foremost. For the majority of men and women dependent on wages to stay afloat, the past 16 years have been marked by setbacks and uncertainty of historic proportion.

Jon Hilsenrath and Bob Davis, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, put it this way:

After 2000, the economy would experience two recessions, a technology-bubble collapse followed by a housing boom, then the largest financial crisis in 75 years and a prolonged period of weak growth.

Full-time workersâ€™ median weekly earnings in constant 2016 dollars have hardly budged: \$774.85 in 2000, \$788.87 in 2015.

According to the American Psychological Association, some 72 percent of adults reported experiencing financial stress in 2014. More than half reported that their incomes were not enough or barely enough to make it from month to month.

The cost of housing â€” rent, mortgage payments, property taxes, insurance, repairs, upkeep, utilities â€” has been growing steadily. The affordability cutoff for rent is generally set at 30 percent of income. In 1960, less than a quarter of renters paid more than 30 percent of their income; by 2013, that

percentage has risen to just under 50 percent.

The solutions Trump has offered to such problems are far removed from realistic government policy. Instead, Trump puts forward name-calling, taunts, mockery, threats, insults, hostility to Mexicans and Muslims, and barely constrained contempt for women.

“His incoherent and contradictory utterances have one thing in common: They provoke and play on feelings of resentment and disdain, intermingled with bits of fear, hatred and anger,” Robert Kagan, the Republican foreign policy analyst, wrote in May.

The simultaneously authoritarian and childish nature of Trump’s campaign is well known: his ridiculing of the disabled, his call on supporters to “knock the crap out of” demonstrators, his schoolyard denunciation of opponents as “losers,” “morons” and “dummies.”

Over the past year, studies have demonstrated that Trump’s tactics have worked to recruit a key segment of the Republican electorate. Support for Trump is powerfully correlated with the strength of voters’ authoritarian views, for example.

In addition, Trump, whose supporters are 89.7 percent white, appeals most strongly to those whites who hold negative views of African-Americans. According to a June Reuters/Ipsos survey, the percentage of Trump voters who agree with such statements as “blacks are less intelligent than whites” and “blacks are more lazy than whites” far outstrip supporters of any other candidate, Democrat or Republican.

Sean Wilentz, a professor of American history at Princeton and the author of “The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln,” contended in an email he sent to me that the nomination of Trump signals

the burnout of modern conservatism. Trump, or Trumpism, is the residue of that burnout “thick with the nativism, racism, and authoritarianism that were always there.

One of the “most egregious misreadings of Trump is that he is part of the populist tradition of Andrew Jackson,” Wilentz pointed out, noting that Jackson battled the Second Bank of the United States “to remove the hands of unelected private bankers from the levers of the federal treasury”; that he “took on the most powerful reactionary slaveholders of his day”; and that he helped build “the first mass democratic political party in the history of the world.”

In this light, according to Wilentz,

to link Jackson to a narcissistic reality show mogul who cashed in on fast and loose dealings in real estate and gambling casinos, who has opposed no reactionaries of any kind, and whose idea of an intellectual appears to be Don King and Mike Ditka “well, all of that is worse than travesty.

Trump, Wilentz concludes, is just “the sort of gouger and business sharper that the Populists organized to stop.”

Trump has plunged headlong into the fever swamps of the right.

Heather Cox Richardson, a professor of history at Boston College, argues that Trump “represents the final collapse of the Movement Conservatism that took over the Republican Party in the 1980s.”

The conservative movement, Richardson writes, had a built-in conflict that it failed to resolve. In order to win white working class support for deregulation and smaller government, Republican leaders had to make the case

that an activist government redistributed wealth from hardworking white men to lazy African-Americans, women and organized workers.

The Trump phenomenon, Richardson suggests, is

a snapshot of the moment voters realize that they have been duped. He plays virulently on the racism and sexism of Movement Conservatism, using the language and the resentments rank-and-file Republican voters have internalized for a generation. But he also echoes their anger that they have been destroyed economically by the policies of the past 35 years.

While Trump has sent mixed signals on gay rights issues, he and his operatives stood aside while members of the Republican Platform Committee produced a document affirming hard right social conservative values.

The platform renounces the Supreme Court's decision legalizing same-sex marriage; supports "therapy" for gay minors; rejects "redefining sex discrimination to include sexual orientation or other categories"; and declares that "our laws and our government's regulations should recognize marriage as the union of one man and one woman."

The conservative thrust of the platform goes far beyond social issues, calling for a wall to "cover the entirety of the southern border" that is "sufficient to stop both vehicular and pedestrian traffic"; an increase in coal production "labeling coal an abundant, clean, affordable, reliable domestic energy resource"; an expansion of energy exploration on public lands; opposition to "ill-conceived laws that would restrict magazine capacity or ban the sale of the most popular and common modern rifle"; enactment of "firearm reciprocity legislation to recognize the right of law-abiding Americans to carry firearms to protect themselves and their families in all 50 states"; and a "human life amendment to the Constitution" to ban abortion, without exemption for rape, incest or saving the life of the mother.

Trump has activated forces on the political right that cannot be deactivated, prompting the party and Republican voters to throw their support behind a man described by his own ghost writer, Tony Schwartz, as a sociopath.

Gordon Humphrey, a former Republican senator from New Hampshire and a leading Trump critic, called and raised Schwartz:

Trump is a sick sociopath. He has no conscience. No feelings of guilt, remorse, empathy or embarrassment.

But none of this matters, apparently. Throughout the week, the Republican National Convention has affirmed its role as the enabler of a man who, win or lose, obscures and distorts our national purpose. Even as we are watching the transformation of a once great political party in real time ("Lock her up! Lock

her up!â€), we still cannot really fathom the depths into which we have fallen.

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