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RUMBLING BENEATH THE SURFACE:

THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

By Jabari A. Lucas
Seldom has an election period been so nasty, pugnacious and brash. Rampant voter dissatisfaction across both political parties has made for an interesting dynamic. In the very timely words of my dear friend Evan McKay, “People are pissed off.” They are mad about economic forces, partially globalization, that have diminished the middle class. They are mad about a political class that seems to be in it for itself. They are mad that their will is no longer effectively acted through the institutions of our political system. People are angry. We see it in the rise of Sen. Bernie Sanders. We see it in the vociferous campaign of Donald Trump. And we see it in the willingness of people to vote for Dr. Jill Stein or Gov. Gary Johnson. Our political landscape seems more like a powder-keg than the quintessentially pluralistic society envisaged by Madison in Federalist 10.

What makes the outrage more intriguing is that the establishment had no idea. Just over a year ago, many thought that, by this time, Hillary Clinton would be easily coronated as the Democratic nominee. It was a widely accepted certainty that she would square off against Jeb Bush or maybe Marco Rubio. Little did they know that there was a rumble intensifying steadily beneath the surface. A myriad of issues still plague the country, and these, on top of the already volatile concoction of rapidly changing demographics and increasing voter disillusionment, threaten transform our two-party system.

Such transformations have historically taken place in the form of critical elections, in which new political parties are formed or existing ones take on new issues and form new voting blocs—essentially, these critical shifts result in political parties realigning. Most approximations contend that there have been around six realignments in U.S. political history. One realignment with an acute, thematic resemblance to our current election cycle occurred in 1828.

1828 REALIGNMENT

At that point, the “Era of Good Feelings,” in which Jeffersonian Democrats comprised the only party of prominence, was shattered. The levying of tariffs, the national bank, burgeoning sectionalism and a feeling of low political efficacy produced a new dichotomy. Put simply, people then, as they do now, felt voiceless. They believed that the bank produced a concentration of the wealth in the hands of the few and created a level of inequity that beckoned destabilization for the entire economy. They felt that the power structure was conveniently and cleverly contrived to favor the elites, and the evils of wealth inequality, Bernie Sanders awoke a sizeable, impotent base on the left. Many people perceived him to be a principled candidate, on the left. Many people perceived him to be a principled candidate, in former Secretary Hillary Clinton.

Secretary Clinton, who spent most of the campaign under the specter of a federal indictment, teems of the asymmetric standard of accountability and corruption that Bernie voters say they detest. Her support for NAFTA, President Obama’s Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Iraq War—the preeminent thorn in her side—has caused her to be perceived as a pusillanimous neo-liberal. Additionally, her Wall Street speaking junkets made her out to be a corporatist who would be cozier to financiers than the middle class. Unfortunately for her, Clinton’s natural disposition for wading into the minutia of policy and facilitating bipartisanship disadvantaged her from being able to genuinely echo the anger of those who felt that the problem is too much centrism. Bernie is her foil, and that was exactly what fueled his strong run.

Initially viewed as a long-shot campaign, Sanders often chided the media for not covering his run, and he bolstered an impression among his supporters that his candidacy was being sabotaged. Ever since the troublesome coin flips in Iowa Caucuses, many have felt the primary process was wrongfully tainted. Given the recent leaks of emails from the top brass at the Democratic National Committee, there is an overwhelming sense of validation, and the unearthed correspondence is invoked as the smoking gun. Notwithstanding that, the influence of undemocratic super-delegates, an overwhelming majority of whom supported Clinton, created a mutinous contingency of progressives called “Bernie-or-Busters.”

For viewers unacquainted with this group of voters, they got to experience their level of ire live in the uproarious first episode of the national convention. Many insiders, despite a hefty convention-bounce, still might be uneasy about party disunion. Without a doubt, Secretary Clinton will need the full breadth of the liberal coalition to ensure a November 8 victory. For the Democrats though, this restive acrimony in the ranks, while vexing right now, probably will not result in long-term difficulties.

RISE OF BERNIE SANDERS

For Senator Bernie Sanders and his supporters, the battle against a corrupt establishment is a familiar narrative. A man whose entire political career has consisted of upbraiding the financial elites of the billionaire class and proselytizing against the evils of wealth inequality, Bernie Sanders awoke a sizeable, impotent base on the left. Many people perceived him to be a principled candidate, in former Secretary Hillary Clinton. Secretary Clinton, who spent most of the campaign under the specter of a federal indictment, teems of the asymmetric standard of accountability and corruption that Bernie voters say they detest. Her support for NAFTA, President Obama’s Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Iraq War—the preeminent thorn in her side—has caused her to be perceived as a pusillanimous neo-liberal. Additionally, her Wall Street speaking junkets made her out to be a corporatist who would be cozier to financiers than the middle class. Unfortunately for her, Clinton’s natural disposition for wading into the minutia of policy and facilitating bipartisanship disadvantaged her from being able to genuinely echo the anger of those who felt that the problem is too much centrism. Bernie is her foil, and that was exactly what fueled his strong run.

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Political parties are durable, umbrella institutions. They encompass many factions and strains of ideological persuasions, and if one splinter gets too rambunctious, the party’s establishment caters more to their sensibilities. What’s more, when outside groups gain traction and threaten to siphon support, the party will adopt that issue – the most recent example of this being the 2010 Tea Party.

After the 2016 Democratic convention, history will regard the candidacy of Bernie Sanders as the force that brought the Democratic Party to the left, rather than the quixotic, self-avowed socialist who split it apart. The platform writing committee, seeing the proverbial writing on the wall, endorsed a lot of Sanders’s ideas including tuition-free public college, a constitutional amendment to reverse the infamous Citizens United ruling, substantially reducing the number of unpledged delegates at future conventions, and raising the minimum wage to $15 per hour.

These compromises look to bring in many Sanders supporters into the fold. While there is no guarantee that the Vermont senator’s most passionate acolytes will fall in line, recent polling from the Washington Post indicates that 90 percent of consistent supporters have come around. Even if they prove ineffective, a raging, disconcertingly discolored megalomaniac on the other side of the aisle will most likely do the trick.

TRUMP’S FAUX POPULISM

Donald Trump, like Sen. Sanders, harped on the corrosive, insidious influence of “special interests” and the perils of ingratiated lobbyists. Just like Sanders, Trump was not expected by anyone to make it past Super Tuesday, let alone to have captured his party’s nomination. Yet he has taken over the GOP, riding the gurgling passion of an emboldened gaggle of voters who feel overlooked.

In the early stages of his candidacy, he trumpeted the notion that his wealth made him incorruptible and impervious to big campaign donors. He said that he did not want the aid of a SuperPAC, and that he would self-finance his campaign. This rhetoric scratched the itch of the base that undergirds the conservative coalition—lower-middle class, white males. However, unlike Bernie Sanders, Trump devolved shamelessly into scapegoating.

There is no other way I can put this; Donald Trump has taken the scene with racist undertones, woeful and willful ignorance and incredibly caustic bombast. His introduction to the campaign was a speech in which he claimed that Mexico was “bringing drugs. [It’s] bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” He also blamed Mexico for the erosion of blue-collar manufacturing jobs, and he has threatened to abandon NAFTA, which would have dangerous consequences for the economy. His two most famous proposals are, of course, the wall that is supposed to stretch across the 2,000-mile US-Mexican border and a ban on Muslim persons seeking to enter the United States. Let us also recollect that one of his chief stratagems for eradicating ISIS: the targeting of the families of alleged terrorists and the infliction of torture and “a hell of a lot worse.” These policy proposals—if I dare dignify these absurd airings as such—were interspersed with the afore-mentioned outbursts of faux-populism, and appeal to not-so-latent white identity politics.

First and foremost, Trump’s populism is disingenuous to say the least. Not only is his tax plan slated to grow the national debt an additional $10 trillion—a far cry from the popular grumblings bemoaning rampant federal spending—it would also disproportionately favor the well-to-do. Plus, he has already reneged on his promise to be self-funded. However, due to his adept propensity to vacillate on several positions in a matter of days and his exercises in dog-whistle politics, he has been able to maintain his middling man sheen. The first character attribute enables him to flip-flop and lie about it with an almost hypnotic flair. The latter presents a troubling development 40 years in the making for the Republican Party.

The term “dog whistle politics” is really a reference to coding that political actors use to attract the attention of the intended audience while tactfully avoiding the gaze of others. That is exactly what the wall is. That’s what the Muslim ban accomplishes. That’s what the mantras “Make America Great Again” and “take our country back” mean. They are dog whistles. They are designed to appeal to the demographic wooed over by the Republicans in the late 1960s—working class, white men. Trump’s rise is just as much a result of the chickens of the Southern Strategy coming home to roost.
SOUTHERN STRATEGY

The Southern Strategy was a Republican electoral gambit that sought to take advantage of a newly available southland that felt abandoned by President Lyndon Johnson and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. After the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, Johnson declared that Democrats “lost the south for a generation.” Republicans, realizing that the pursuit for civil rights would make a considerable contingent of the electorate available, knew that they had to seize the opportunity. His deeply conservative opponent during the election in the same year, Barry Goldwater, articulated opposition to the legislation. Though he lost in a risible runaway, Goldwater laid the foundation for the new solid South that would, instead, be solidly red.

Now these Republicans feel as though they have been passed by. While they might pay lip service to the ideals of economic justice, their cause is motivated more so by identity politics—specifically white identity politics. A strong, bolstering minority of Latinos, a freer LGBTQ community and a black man in the oval office harkened a new American society. Increasing diversity, for some, makes them feel as though their values are cultural remnants of yesteryear. A diminished sense of relevance, compounded by rougher economic outlooks for persons reeling from the loss of manufacturing, has rendered the white male feeling disregarded. Trump’s approach is to ostentatiously pay tribute to this unrest, continuing the paradigm of Goldwater.

Make no mistake about it. A recent study by the Cook Political Report concluded 38 percent of Republicans are racially resentful, a marked difference from the 1986 figure of nine percent. A similar study conducted by Hamilton College political scientist Philip Klinker found that “moving from the least to the most resentful view of African Americans increases support for Trump by 44 points.”

This would explain why we have anecdotal accounts of violence against “Black Lives Matter” protestors. It would also explain the videos that reveal episodic displays of vitriolic, racial jeering at Trump rallies. It also elucidates those perturbing poll results that indicated 20 percent of Trump supporters don’t support the Emancipation Proclamation. It explains why Trump is arousing an element in this country, namely in the Republican Party, that has lain dormant until a black man’s presidential election was met by a dogged, almost pathological need to delegitimize it from the very first day.

This election has made for an interest story to be told decades from now. On both sides, people feel neglected by those who are supposed to advance their interests, and the media and its pundits seemed incapable of forecasting the brewing tempest. Both political parties have nominated people who seem unable to heal the nation’s deep wounds and restore the citizens’ faith in the ability of their public servants to govern. In a sense, both candidates embody the very thing the rowdiest parts of their coalitions detest—entrenched, institutionalized elitism. Normally, that would spell trouble for both parties, but if there is one overarching lesson in all of this, it’s that this year is not normal.

MOVING FORWARD

Donald Trump will temporarily suture the divisions of the Democratic Party. United under a more progressive platform gleaned from the key tenets of Sanders’s campaign, Democrats will likely come together to elect Hillary Clinton. Across the aisle, Trump presents the Republicans with a troubling conundrum. The Republicans must decide if they will rally together to bring down their own standard-bearer in the name of the greater good, or they can continue to juggle a precarious, untenable voting bloc.

Trump is relying heavily on the support of white people to win, but within this strategy is one huge problem—there are not enough of them. Relying solely on the power of white identity politics will not only preclude any legitimate shot for Trump to win the White House, it will also be the precarious thread that will unravel the already loosely entwined Republican fabric. As time elapses, the country will continue to become a more colorful place—literally.

The longer the GOP lacks the courage to rebuff a candidate who exploits racial sentiments to galvanize support, the garish blemish of disrepute that already stains the party among minority voters will linger even longer. Even if Trump were to pull off an upset, it would be in the Republicans’ long-term interest to distance themselves from him. Like it or not, the Republican Party’s elite must accept that they cannot continue into the 21st century as the party of the straight, white male. They cannot merely pay lip service to the plights of the black and brown. Republicans must demonstrate that they can represent their interests as vociferously as Democrats. The first step is a writ large already across the twittersphere, encapsulated simply in a meager, two-word phrase: “Dump Trump.”