

The 2016 US Presidential Election: Through the Looking Glass

Two weeks after the US the presidential election I participated in a round table discussion at Aberystwyth University to analyse the aftermath of Donald Trump's election. In the time since, the conversation about the US election has revolved much around Trump's relationship with Russia and sources for the DNC leaks. Sound bites and news gobbets march unendingly past our televisions and ipads, showcasing uncertainty, paranoia, and dismay. The infrastructural pillars of the postwar order which once appeared resolute and sacrosanct, suddenly seem fragile and unsure. It would have been unthinkable for instance that the US intelligence community and a US president elect might engage in an antagonistic propaganda battle, both employing the very media forces which they seek to subvert. But now after the election these proceedings are common place and perhaps even expected. In light of these spectacles, many of pundits and commentators have become oracles of an American demise, proclaiming that this election marks the end of the American century and represents a step backwards in a dangerous geopolitical environment. Indeed, there seem to be few of us who would counsel that the Great Republic has weathered worse. In either case, it is impossible to predict the legacy of such a transformative election in such a troubled year. However, we can examine the fundamentals of the election itself. Now, as the inauguration of the 45th President of the United States approaches and the dust has settled on the actual process of the election, it poses an opportunity to reflect on that process and the campaigns which led us here to the new world we all inhabit. What follows were my words that and thoughts that evening on the fallout of an election result few saw coming and fewer still were prepared for.

There are a couple of ways to understand this election. The first revolves around why Trump won against such outrageous odds (including losing the popular vote). Donald Trump's campaign was certainly unorthodox to say the least. All the hallmarks of a traditional, victorious campaign in US presidential politics were neglected and at times eschewed by Trump's campaign. There was very little engagement with the local voters on a personal level. The notion of developing a 'ground game' or local political infrastructure to canvass neighbourhoods seems unimportant. The campaign did not hold exclusive dinner parties to raise finances for a political war chest and there were no 'small' events and even less knocking door-to-door.

Instead, Trump played to his strengths in media, entertainment, and spectacle. Rather than buy television ads and fund get-out-the-vote operations in battle-ground states like the highly organised Clinton campaign, Trump used social media (especially Twitter), digital marketing, and his clever domination of the 24 hour news cycle as a proxy for television advertisements. This strategy also saw Trump frequently flying to various states and holding massive campaign rallies, which were often reported on by the media, further providing free advertisements for Trump. This strategy coupled with Trump's specific targeting of the 'Rust Belt' (several commentators, including myself, believed was almost impossible and fairly mad) sent his campaign deep into traditionally held Blue states like Michigan and Wisconsin as well as making his campaign appear competitive in the rural and industrial communities of Pennsylvania, which had remained little more than an pipe dream for the Republican party. Even with cost of his rallies, lack of a convincing ground game and the shambolic nature of his party conference and campaign, Trump ran a relatively cost-effective ship. According to Bloomberg Politics, the total spent for each campaign including Super-PACs, Party

money, and donations placed Trump's Campaign at \$616.5 Million. While this appears to be an extraordinary amount of money, consider that Clinton's campaign all-in, spent an astronomical \$1.1 billion and still lost.

Though several may disagree, it would be wrong to deny Trump a certain claim to genius concerning his campaign. He understood, better than any perhaps, the power of controlling a narrative and using the media to his advantage. There are of course mitigating circumstances to consider; the DNC leaks, Trump's relationship with Russia, Hillary's health scare and ludicrous attempt to cover it up, and of course James Comey's catastrophic letter reopening the FBI's investigation on Hillary Clinton. But regardless of these, Trump played his hand well, tapping into blue collar, populist anxiety and picking up a group of voters which the DNC had once considered their bread and butter but in recent years had done little to protect and spent even less time listening to.

Another thing to consider is why Hillary lost. There is a trifecta of issues here. The first and perhaps most obvious is that Hillary Clinton was poor candidate. In an anti-establishment year, the ultimate establish candidate was chosen as the Democratic champion. She had been in the national spotlight since the early 90s as first lady, and then served as a Senator for New York; All the while she was practically despised by the Right-wing in US politics. Her political baggage stretched back more than 25 years and the hypothesis of her presidency had been tested in 2008 and found wanting. Her campaign struggled to reintroduce her to the American public repeatedly and there was an air of dishonesty which for some inexplicable reason she could never shake. Rumours of her arrogance, distrust, and dislike for the ordinary voter were not dispelled, but emboldened by her choice to hide her pneumonia. When the DNC leaks did surface, they showed a campaign colluding with the Democratic Party and the media to derail Bernie Sanders and then use him as a symbol. For instance, news outlets reporting on the delegate count during the DNC primary were always quick to include the pledged super delegates, which only count on the day they are cast and a free to be altered at any time. This gave an unfair advantage to Hillary and many Bernie supports resented it.

The final two issues here concern the tactical and strategic approach of the Clinton Campaign itself. Basically, it was a poorly run campaign. It seems very odd indeed that Hillary Clinton would trust John Podesta to run her campaign again after 2008. It is a cruel irony that several of the same mistakes made in 2008 were replayed in 2016. One might have thought she would have tried to reconnect with James Carville, arguably one the greatest minds in American politics for help. But she chose to stick with Podesta who revealed his short comings as a campaign manager repeatedly. Of course, not all the campaign's failings are directly his fault but the buck must stop somewhere. He allowed Hillary to avoid confrontation with the public, particularly regarding her email scandal. She went 260 plus days without giving a press conference. Clearly Podesta and Clinton adopted the strategy which urged Clinton's silence in the face of Trump's pomposity, hoping that enough people would see he was unfit for office. But as we now know, this doesn't work. A compelling narrative is always more important than being better than the other guy. Neither Podesta nor Clinton ever articulated a compelling narrative or even vision of a Clinton presidency which left a taste of 'power for power's sake' in the mouths of many voters. The campaign also misunderstood Trump's resonance with blue collar voters. The campaign assumed the Rust Belt was a blue wall and would never turn. They believed it so much that the campaign neglected caring for this blue wall. Hillary never even went to Wisconsin or stopped by a United Auto Workers union hall in Michigan. Naturally, Trump did.

Of course in pointing out these flaws with the campaign it's important to remember that in many ways it was still a good campaign, after all it did win the popular vote by nearly 3 million votes. But the problem was that it didn't win those votes in the right places. Several people have adopted an attitude against the US electoral system because of this which seems odd and misplaced. Everyone agreed on the rules before the game started. However, in the last 16 years two US elections have been decided by the Electoral College. This indicates a reform may be necessary but the system must largely remain because it balances the urban and rural states to insure there isn't a tyranny of the majority. It is unsurprising that Clinton won so many votes in California, New York, or Illinois. But by looking at the electoral map now, it is clear she failed to make her case to Blue collar, working class voters and this devastated her campaign in South East and in the Rust belt.

It may be difficult to see those broad sunlit uplands of the future after this election but as an American I remain optimistic; Optimistic that America's national sense of self combined with the legal, political, and structural checks engineered by the founders will prevent the United States from wandering too far from what Lincoln called 'the better angels' of its nature; Optimistic that an inclusive and diverse America will not be upended by Trump's divisive politics and angry populism. And finally, I remain optimistic that we will all work together to see the ship of state sail past these troubled waters.