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DECLARATIONS

What Trump Got That Romney Didn't

Ideology isn't enough to provide the unity America needs.



Donald Trump in Indianapolis, Dec. 1. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS



By

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The other night I came across an internet exchange I'd had last June with a talented writer and editor, a journalist who is also conservative. The journalist mentioned how some of those writing on Donald Trump this year seemed to have replaced logic with emotion, even becoming "unhinged." I agreed. It was a hot year, full of pressure, anger and stress.

I observed that at least some pro-Trump writers were trying "to try to break through and take on the brain-dead conservatism of the past generation." I added by way of explanation: "I should say our country is, I feel, in the middle of a moral, social, and cultural catastrophe, and this has rearranged my policy priorities the past few years. It is not 1980, that was another America. I find myself in broad sympathy with Trump's stands as he professes them, and of course of Trump supporters. But Trump? Oh I fear he will not be worthy of them, or worthy of his own issues."

Which is more or less where I wound up in November.

I'd forgotten the exchange. But it was seeing the reference to our catastrophes, which I'll quickly define as "The unhelpful and even ugly ways our country has changed the past 30 or so years, the chafing divisions and antagonisms, the myriad injustices and declines"—made me think, again, of a fear I've had for more than a decade. It's the fear that a nut or group of nuts gets lucky, breaks through our defenses, and hurts us, badly. Lines go down. Anxiety is high and sustained. National unity—our ability to remain together as a people—will at that point be everything. All will depend on Americans helping each other and sticking together—that's how we'll get through it—and not turning on each other. And so I think what helps in this area should be encouraged—what ties we have strengthened in all spheres, neighborhood and government, personal and public.

When I write on politics these things are usually in the back of my mind. When you think like this, it is by its nature prioritizing. It makes you see secondary crises as secondary. It leaves you worrying less about things that won't immediately kill us.

These thoughts came very much to the fore of my mind in the 2012 presidential election. I had since the 2000s seen a considerable amount of cultural chaos on the ground in America, and both witnessed and known of struggles made sharper by the crash of 2008,

an event still not fully appreciated for its seismic impact on the American psyche. Mitt Romney was running for president and made his famous, secretly taped “47%” remark, in which he suggested he'd get no support from voters who depend on government and don't pay income taxes.

This was divisive and belittling. I lost patience with his campaign. “You have to have more respect than that, and more affection, you don't write anyone off you invite everyone in,” I wrote in these pages. Many factors go into our political affiliations and decisions. It's not all economic determinism. In another column, in August 2012, I observed that the election would be decided by people who embody a mix of attitudes. They sincerely worry about high spending but are also on disability or Medicare. They're working-class or middle-class, and even if they don't have the shiniest of lives, they can tell you at great and eloquent length how the culture has gone to hell. They look at Republicans and think, “Do these guys really understand my life? Do they know what it is for us?” They're concerned about their neighbors and friends, “because people are not just protective of themselves, they're loyal to others.” Republicans, I observe, have to demonstrate that when it comes to entitlements “they're the lifeguard, not the shark.”

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“Americans are not ideologues,” I wrote. “They think ideology is something squished down on their heads from on high, something imposed on them by big thinkers who create systems we're all supposed to conform to. Americans are more interested in philosophy, which bubbles up from human beings, from

tradition and learned experience, and isn't imposed.”

More pertinent than ideology, I thought, was the work of a political philosopher, Edmund Burke. “Burke respected reality, acknowledged human nature, and appreciated political context. In ‘Reflections on the Revolution in France,’ he wrote, ‘Circumstances (which with some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing color and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind.’ ”

I came to think that year, in 2012, that Republicans were no longer considering the circumstances.

They should now. Life has been famously cruel to some good people the past few decades. The past few years it seemed the progressive left and the Democratic Party, confident in what they called the coalition of the ascendant, were looking at the old American working class, especially the white working class, and saying: “Here's your disability check, now go take your opioids and get lost while we transform our country. By the way, we have friends on Wall Street.” From the right and Republicans it was: “Take your piece of the dole, we are importing an entire new people from other countries to take your place, could you please sort of pass away? We're replacing you! Why can't you get the message? By the way, we have friends on Wall Street.”

People don't want to be shunted aside or told they're expendable, that they're yesterday and no longer count. Especially people whose country this is too, who've been here a long time and paid its taxes, whose sons died in its wars.

I think Donald Trump and many around him have it right, that the Republican Party should shift its emphasis to become a center-right party. One of the most interesting comments at the recent Kennedy School postelection conference came from Mr. Trump's pollster Tony Fabrizio. People don't get Trump, he said, because “we really live in a world where everybody thinks that ideology is linear, and that ‘If you answer these 10 questions correctly, that makes you a conservative.’ ” He added, “many people tried to look at the Donald Trump phenomenon through the ideological lenses which had defined previous Republican presidential nominating contests.” But “Donald Trump is postideological.” Which, he said, is why so many Bernie Sanders people liked him.

I see conservatives debating the Carrier decision—the implications of an incoming president persuading, inducing, perhaps to a degree pressuring a company not to leave Indiana. A factory will stay, and perhaps a thousand jobs. It's not something that can work every day or be done every day, but it's the right sympathetic symbolism. It's not bad if people see a shift in decision making from abstract dogma to literal, concrete reality. It's not bad if someone thinks the federal government is on their side for a change.

In fact, it can be unifying.

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