

Trump

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Time to Get Tough: Make America Great Again!

by Donald J. Trump

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The Donald Trump situation, as anxious Republicans and mystified commentators sometimes call it, only grows more anxiety-producing and mystifying by the week. His performance in the August 6 debate was not considered world-beating. Then, in the wake of it, he was widely perceived as having made reference in a CNN interview to the menstrual cycle of Fox News host and debate moderator Megyn Kelly, which was supposed to finish him off. It was about the fourth such dose of poison but, Rasputin-like, Trump has survived each one.¹ After the debate, he maintained his large lead over the field.

Then on August 11, Trump held his first real campaign-style press conference, in a Michigan town just south of Saginaw. It was rich in the usual self-aggrandizing bluster—but he also showed that he can discuss issues and policy about as well as most of the GOP candidates. That is perhaps not the highest of bars, but he cleared it easily.

On August 21, he held a large rally at a college football stadium in Mobile, Alabama. It seems safe to conjecture that for this native of Queens and resident of midtown Manhattan, this was probably virgin territory. He filled less than 30,000 of its 40,000 seats, but the point was made that he could go deep into the bosom of the Bible Belt and draw a crowd that no other Republican could begin to attract. And now, as autumn approaches and the campaign begins to intensify, we have careened our way into a reality in which the question “who is the current front-runner for the GOP nomination?” has only one plausible answer.

On the one hand, it has seemed impossible to believe that Trump’s candidacy would evolve into something the political leaders and commentators would have to take seriously. For weeks after his June 16 announcement, the experts agreed that surely, this would all just collapse at some point. These experts would dig into the polling and find numbers that seemed to foretell Trump’s imminent demise, and indeed nervous GOP leaders continue to seek solace in results showing that most Republicans don’t believe he’ll be the nominee.

On the other hand, however: Is Trump not the logical culmination of where Republican politics have been headed for many years now, going back to the Clinton and Bush presidencies, but especially during the tenure of Barack Obama? Two qualities more than any others have driven conservatism in our time. The first is cultural and racial resentment, felt by the mostly older and very white population the GOP increasingly represents—resentment against a fast-changing, more openly sexual America, as well as against dark-skinned immigrants, and White House occupants, and gay people and political correctness and the “moocher class” and all the rest. The second is what we might call spectacle—the unrelenting push toward a rhetorical style ever more gladiatorial and ever more outraged (and outrageous), driven initially by talk-radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh and now reproduced on websites, podcasts, and Twitter feeds too numerous to mention. There is a strong tendency, perfected over the years by Fox News, to cover and discuss domestic politics as a combination of war, sport, and entertainment all at once.



Donald Trump; drawing by James Ferguson

Well, Trump is conservative resentment and spectacle made flesh. In the four or so years since he first converted himself into a rage machine, banging on about Obama's birth certificate and so forth, he has developed into an adept at stoking conservative resentment. And while it's true that Trump has now moved beyond that to embrace a few heterodox and even surprisingly progressive positions, it was resentment—specifically, his remarks about Mexico “sending” us rapists and criminals, back in June—that vaulted him to the top of polls. Trump has continued to stake out far-right positions on immigration, calling for the deportation of around 11 million undocumented people and an end to birthright citizenship, which has been guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment since 1868.

And as for spectacle, Trump is one of the defining showmen of our new Gilded Age, whether we like that fact or not. Grandiosity, ostentation, and at least a touch of vulgarity have been his hallmarks from the beginning, the beginning being his 1980 reopening of the old and dowdy Commodore Hotel at Grand Central as a Grand Hyatt, bathed in marble, mirrors, chrome, and glass—“classy,” to be sure, albeit in a Great Neck catering hall kind of way.

When I first started covering politics in New York during that decade, Trump would regularly bait Mayor Ed Koch into fights that were, well—war, sport, and entertainment all at once. His modus operandi, whether tearing down Bonwit Teller to build Trump Tower then or calling his critics “haters” and “losers” today, is unchanged. When erecting Trump Tower, according to investigative reporter and Trump biographer Wayne Barrett, he threatened a Koch administration official who had denied him a crucial abatement with these words: “I don't know whether it's still possible for you to change your decision or not. But I want you to know that I am a very rich and powerful person in this town and there is a reason I got that way. I will never forget what you did.”² The tower, of course, was built; in 1986, the official left the Koch administration to join the Trump Organization.

That little story underscores the point that what Donald wants, Donald usually gets. It's very difficult to imagine him actually becoming president. But even if it all comes crashing down next week, Trump has already gotten quite a lot. He has altered Republican politics fundamentally. Certain assumptions about what a Republican politician could and could not get away with doing, assumptions shared by the entire political establishment—that you couldn't attack a war hero, say, or that a GOP candidate would never dare pick a fight with Fox—have been shattered. When he speaks, the media will listen and, given the ratings he ensures, will give him as much coverage as traffic numbers suggest they ought to.

Republican Party Chairman Reince Priebus is clearly terrified of him. Even Fox News head Roger Ailes—the effective cochairman of the Republican Party for a number of years now—treats him gingerly. Karl Rove wants desperately for the party establishment to block him. They all wish he would go away, even while they must know that they are responsible for Trump because they have spent many years creating an audience that was just waiting for someone like him to come along.

Those are the long-term culprits behind the rise of Trumpism. The three major nearer-term explanations for his success are pretty straightforward. The first is his celebrity. Trump hosts a network prime-time show, NBC's *The Celebrity Apprentice*, which has run for fourteen seasons (as *The Apprentice* for eight of those seasons). That is a long time to be on prime-time television. *Seinfeld*, one of the most popular television shows in history, lasted nine seasons.

Apprentice ratings have been up and down. In season fourteen, Trump's show averaged around six million viewers—not great for network TV, but about twice as many as cable news at its highest. Although NBC renewed the show at the last minute for a fifteenth season, and though it may go on, the network severed its ties with Trump after his comments on Mexican immigrants. But the show, on which he ruthlessly judged contestants' competence and famously fired them as problems were resolved in an hour's time, has already brought him to a level of celebrity that made his formidable poll numbers possible.

The second reason is the surprising weakness of the rest of the GOP field. Here, the main story is Jeb Bush, because he is the one who was designated the establishment front-runner. Someone is assigned that role in every Republican nomination process—Bob Dole, George W. Bush, John McCain, Mitt Romney. They vacuum up the big money, secure the key endorsements, and develop an aura as the default candidate, the one who ought to win the nomination unless something goes really haywire.

Bush has raised the money and lined up the endorsements, but his aura so far is definitely not that of the default choice. One has the sense that if he didn't have such a familiar name, he might not even have qualified for that first debate. A part of his problem is ideological. He's trying, with respect to immigration and a couple of other issues, to run a somewhat more centrist campaign than the others, aware that Romney had trouble pivoting back toward the middle in 2012 after taking some very conservative positions to win primary votes. As a result the hard-shell base is highly suspicious of him.

Another Bush problem is simply one of demeanor. He often looks as if he's just not all that interested in what is happening to him and would rather be somewhere else. His debate performance was generally judged to be lackluster, but even it was energetic in comparison to some of his press conferences and speeches, which have been downright morose. Trump, in his characteristically brusque way, put his finger right on it recently when he said, "Jeb Bush is a low-energy person."

Bush still runs fairly well in national polls—he's usually second to Trump, although a pretty distant second. Many observers continue to believe that he'll outlast everyone else by dint of money—as of July 31, Bush had raised \$120 million, compared to Hillary Clinton's \$68 million; the closest Republican was Texas Senator Ted Cruz, at \$52 million.³ But it's worth remembering here that the billionaire Trump has virtually unlimited money without having to raise a cent.

The other Republican candidates all have their difficulties. Scott Walker moved himself to the front of the pack earlier this year with a fiery speech in Iowa in which he attacked Chris Christie and Jeb Bush. He's adopted every right-wing position he could since then, but he hasn't really connected viscerally with voters and has slipped a bit in the polls. Marco Rubio was thought to be among the debate's winners, but he's one of those candidates who is somehow slightly better on paper (young, Latino, from Florida) than in the flesh.

Cruz and the African-American neurosurgeon Ben Carson were the debate's biggest beneficiaries, but they're both far too conservative to win a general election. The others just aren't cutting through, with the possible exception of Ohio Governor John Kasich, who could be a strong general-election candidate but who might have a lot of trouble getting there. (He accepted an expansion of federal Medicaid money under Obamacare, about which he'll have a lot of explaining to do.) But the field's collective lack of charisma gave a huge opening to a man with such an outsized personality and ego.

The final cause of Trump's rise has been the intense attention given to him by the political media. The ratings obsessions of the three cable news networks drive the constant Trump coverage. Every morning, cable news executives are able to see which segments did best the previous night among the crucial twenty-five-to-fifty-four-year-old demographic. Chances are it was usually the Trump segments. For news websites from *The New York Times* on down to individual blogs, Trump means traffic.

The viewership figures for the debate, by the way, were staggering at 24 million. Fox News, which broadcast the show, boasted that it was the highest-rated telecast outside of sporting events in the history of cable television. Trump's comments congratulating himself for the big numbers were typical of his rhetoric—he is surely right for the most part that the ratings were about him, but he always overstates things when belittling others. He said that without him, the debate might have drawn two million viewers. But even the earlier, "happy hour" debate featuring the seven contenders who didn't qualify for the main debate drew six million. He can't help denigrating any project that does not have him at its center.

The questions of what Trump actually believes and what policies he would advance have only recently started to attract attention. His record hardly demonstrates a fealty to conservatism. "In many cases, I probably identify more as Democrat," he told CNN's Wolf Blitzer in 2004. "It just seems that the economy does better under the Democrats than the Republicans."⁴ He has also said recently that Bill Clinton was the best of the last four presidents; at the debate, he went well out of his way to point out that he was the only person on the stage who opposed the Iraq war. He recently defended Planned Parenthood's non-abortion-related services, something no other Republican candidate would ever dare to do. Going back farther in time, to a book he wrote in 2000, he backed universal, single-payer health care.

The other, normal candidates would be savaged over such apostasies, but Trump can get away with them (for now) because the occasional heterodoxy continues to publicize Trump as unbought and unbossed and poking a finger in the Republican establishment's eye while also promising to build a Great Wall on the border and "build up our military so strong...that nobody will mess with us." His comment that he would not instantly tear up the Iran nuclear deal should it pass was eye-catching, although he went on to say it was a "horrible deal" and he "would police that contract so tough they wouldn't have a chance." In the Alabama speech, he again attacked the deal, suggesting perhaps that he's been reading the polls that show upward of 80 percent of Republicans opposing it.

And now we have *Time to Get Tough*. Trump wrote the book in 2011 as he was preparing for a 2012 run that he did not in the end pursue. It sits comfortably within the standard campaign self-promotion genre, and within the ideological bounds that should please conservatives (Trump gave the book to Regnery, the conservative house, to publish). It is now being reissued, with, it must be acknowledged, impeccable showman's timing.

What makes the book a bit different, though, and what separates Trump from your typical candidate, is the degree to which he sees politics as a negotiation. He, being the world's greatest negotiator bar none, because he's become a very wealthy man through the art of negotiation, will set lots of things right by force of will. His top targets are OPEC and China:

It starts with China and OPEC. The hundreds of billions of dollars they steal from us each year must end right away. We need a president with a titanium spine who will stand up to these shakedown artists and demand that they get their greedy hands out of our pockets effective immediately.

His proposal is to sue OPEC under US antitrust law. This is not a new idea. In fact it's a very old one. From virtually the moment the cartel raised oil prices for Americans in the 1970s, politicians and international law experts began examining the question of whether an extra-state international organization could successfully be sued in an American court. Opinion is very much divided on the question, to say nothing of whether OPEC wouldn't simply laugh an adverse verdict away.

With respect to China, Trump wants to impose a 25 percent tariff on all goods made there that are sold here. Once we do that, Trump writes,

End of story. You think the Chinese wouldn't respond constructively? No businessman I know would want to turn his back on the US market—and the Chinese wouldn't either.

Perhaps not, but surely the Chinese government would retaliate by slapping tariffs on US-made imports, and that would hurt American exporters. This sort of thing goes on all the time now anyway. The Obama administration has put huge tariffs on Chinese tires and solar panels, and the Chinese have imposed high duties on American cars and trucks.

In the real, complicated world, solving one problem generally means creating another. But Trump's moral universe has no space for such disorder. All it takes is some resolve, titanium again being the key element:

I do deals—big deals—all the time. I know and work with all the toughest operators in the world of high-stakes global finance. These are hard-driving, vicious cutthroat financial killers, the kind of people who leave blood all over the boardroom table and fight to the bitter end to gain maximum advantage. And guess what? Those are *exactly* the kind of negotiators the United States needs, not these cream puff "diplomats" Obama sends around the globe to play patty cake with foreign governments. No, we need smart people with titanium spines and big brains who love America enough to fight fiercely for our interests.

That's the essence of it. His supporters seem to believe that he can do these things; or, even if they don't quite believe, they long for someone who can—who can tame OPEC and China and Iran as if world affairs could be made to be like a reality TV show. This is an understandable yearning to some extent, in an age in which the United States' ability to call the global shots is so much reduced from what it was fifty years ago. But it has a more sinister aspect, this wish for a strong man who can just fix everything. And surely it's also the case for some Trump supporters that after eight years of Obama, a bullying white man is exactly what is needed to restore things to their natural order. It is these qualities that

lend Trumpism its faintly disturbing *Face in the Crowd* odor.

On domestic issues, his book is rather dull. Every chapter—on taxes, entitlements, health care, the social safety net—starts out with a few broadsides flung at Obama for being either incompetent, weak, or too left-wing and then moves on to policy prescriptions that have been standard conservative points for years. There would be four marginal tax rates under President Trump, the highest at just 15 percent, and that only on dollars earned above \$1 million. On top of this he would reduce the corporate tax rate to zero. The national treasury would be depleted. But not to worry—working people would get to keep more of their hard-earned money, and they'd get to spend more years earning it, since Trump proposes raising the retirement age.

At this point it would be absurd to keep predicting Trump's imminent collapse. It looks as if he'll be around when they start counting votes in Iowa and New Hampshire, and we'll just see how he does. Over the course of the summer, Republican poll respondents grew to see him more and more favorably, and he led his rivals not just among conservatives but also among moderates, among both men and women, and in all age groups. In a mid-August CNN poll, he vaulted to within six points of Hillary Clinton, dramatically closer than the previous month.

If he's still around next March, Trump could benefit from a change the GOP has made to how delegates are awarded. In primaries and caucuses before March 15, candidates will be awarded delegates proportionately to their vote total; but from March 15 onward, states will have the option of awarding delegates on a winner-take-all basis. This is a change from 2012, and the idea here is to avoid a drawn-out battle of the sort that took place in that year between Romney and Rick Santorum, and to get to a nominee more quickly.

On paper, this change was intended to benefit a front-runner such as Bush. But what if Trump is still running come March 15? He certainly won't lack for money. What if a still-plausible Trump wins primaries in some large, winner-take-all states?

But the real scare Trump puts into the Republican establishment is his threat to run a third-party candidacy. That's a complicated thing to do, since each state has its own ballot access rules; but surely a rich man can pay all the lawyers he must in order to get on fifty state ballots. Trump would likely qualify for the fall television debates in 2016. And if he got just 4 or 5 percent of the vote in a few key states—Florida, Ohio, Virginia—the result would certainly be a Democratic victory.

Republican Party Chairman Priebus obviously knows this, which is why you only ever hear him say nice things about Trump. And Trump enjoys dangling this sword over the party, as he did in the debate. At his August 11 press conference, he said he wanted to be treated “fairly” by the party:

Fairly means fairly. I want to be treated fairly. I want the establishment—look, I was part of the establishment.

Let me explain. I was the establishment two months ago. I was like the fair-haired boy. I was a giver, a big giver. Once I decided to run, all of a sudden, I'm sort of semi-anti-establishment. Now, leading in all the polls, they're treating me very well. I mean, I'm being treated very well.

Reince Priebus has been terrific. His people have been terrific. They're dealing with my people. They're dealing with Corey [Lewandowski, Trump's campaign manager]. We have a great relationship. I want to run as a Republican. I don't want to run a third party or as an independent. I want to run as a Republican. As long as I'm treated fairly, that's going to be the case.

And fairly is an instinct. It's an instinct. I know what fair is. You know what fair is.

I doubt Trump will pursue such a candidacy.⁵ Usually, there's a lot of loose talk in the preelection year, but once the general election is eight, six, four months away, the wilder speculations give way to more conventional habits. For example, it's now less certain than it was two months ago that Hillary Clinton will be the Democratic nominee. But if she is, by next summer all the Democratic voters who say today that she leaves them totally cold will start thinking more

about the Supreme Court and all the horrors a Republican president would visit upon the nation and start making their peace with her.

The same dynamic seems likely to occur on the other side. By next spring, Republican voters should have a good sense of which of their choices matches up most competitively against Clinton. If that's not Trump, he'll fade away. But what if he's still popular? After years of settling for the conventional candidate (McCain, Romney), maybe Republican primary voters will follow their collective id and embrace resentment and spectacle. It's certainly where they've been heading for a while now.

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- 1 The first three: his reference to Mexican "rapists"; his mockery of John McCain's war heroism; the revelation that he may have once "violated" his then wife Ivana. All washed off him. ↵
 - 2 See Wayne Barrett, *Trump: The Deals and the Downfall* (HarperCollins, 1992), p. 184. ↵
 - 3 See "Which Presidential Candidates Are Winning the Money Race," *The New York Times*, August 1, 2015. ↵
 - 4 See Chris Moody, "Trump in '04: 'I Probably Identify More as Democrat,'" CNN.com, July 22, 2015. ↵
 - 5 *Postscript* : On Thursday September 3, Trump met with Reince Priebus at Trump Tower and signed a pledge agreeing to support the Republican nominee, which the party had made a condition for his name to appear on some primary ballots next year. The pledge is not binding, and the party has no power to block Trump should he change his mind next year. ↵

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