



# THE HOUSE OF TRUMP: From nightmare to reality

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## The House of Trump: From nightmare to reality

The results are in and Super Tuesday appears to have solidified Mr. Trump's position in his march towards the Republican nomination. For a Republican Party establishment as well as for the vast majority of political commentators and pundits waiting for months for his candidacy to implode or face a spectacular collapse, the results of Super Tuesday demonstrated that Mr. Trump's lead in the delegate count and more importantly in the polling for the upcoming primary contests appears to set him on a path to the Republican Party's nomination.



*Donald Trump speaking with supporters at a campaign rally at the South Point Arena in Las Vegas, Nevada - Photo by Gage Skidmore/FLICKR*

Mr. Trump's ascendant candidacy has multiple causes. Many commentators have credited his name recognition or his outrageous statements and the toxic irreverence by which he stands by them. Others note his media-savvy persona or the fact that the Republican Party establishment was wrong in its gamble to ignore the Trump phenomenon for so long, thinking he would somehow disappear.

Yet, understanding Mr. Trump's defiant performance against an almost unanimous expectation that he would soon be relegated to the margins cannot be complete unless one acknowledges that the root of his resonance with so many people is his acknowledgement that there is something very wrong with how America is governed today. Going to almost Shakespearean dramatic depths to convey this message, the specifics of what he says play an

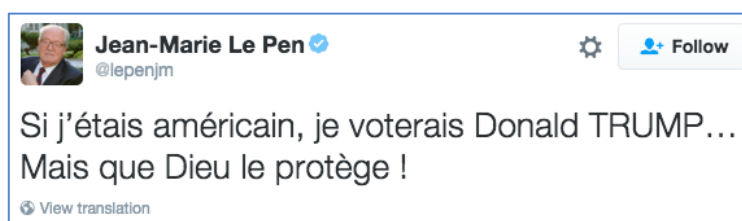
increasingly diminishing role as long as the grand narrative remains that the state of the US is rotten and that he is the only one who can restore the country to that ever elusive state of former greatness.

### **The brand of Trump: Old Tricks, New Packaging**

This also explains the staying power of brand Trump.

Mr. Trump's candidacy does not represent a sudden switch in one election campaign towards a candidate that harps on irredentism, fear and distrust toward Washington. The repertoire he has been using has strong foundations in the collective existential fears that were created and cultivated in America since September 11<sup>th</sup>. The economic basis for voter anger he is tapping into has been building over the last few decades.<sup>1</sup> The anti-establishment themes he chooses to focus on have been very close to the heart of the Tea Party movement, the grassroots movement that emerged after Barack Obama was elected as President, and have been propagated for long by the fiercest voices of the modern conservative movement, such as talk show host Rush Limbaugh.

More crucially, Mr. Trump has been called a wide variety of things, ranging from a 'smear addict' to an 'Orange Mussolini', but the truth of the matter is that tickling people's fears and prejudices was also utilised in previous elections by several candidates as a vehicle toward mobilising their base and having their voters get out to vote. Channelling excess populism and demagoguery has been a crucial component in other candidates' success in the past (to varying extents, take Pat Buchanan, Joe McCarthy, George Wallace, Huey Long and Ross Perot for example). There have been undertones of bigotry present in the rhetoric of many other conservative politicians. Finally, exploiting the visceral anger of Americans or showing willingness to take on the political establishment has been a recipe that has been tried and tested in campaign politics beforehand.



However, in this case, there is no semblance of argumentative rationality, no veneer of respectability, and no façade of political correctness in doing so. This is a very crucial component of Mr. Trump's success so far, and one that crucially differentiates him from the vast majority of previous attempts at using a fear-based campaign as a Trojan horse for electoral success. In other words, the attractiveness of his elegy for America's lost greatness

<sup>1</sup> 'Why Trump Now', Thomas B. Edsall, *The New York Times*, March 1, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/02/opinion/campaign-stops/why-trump-now.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/02/opinion/campaign-stops/why-trump-now.html?_r=0)



and the fear-based demagoguery it is based on comes from candidate Trump himself and his own idiosyncratic showman nature.

Provocation is indelibly woven into Mr. Trump's (body) language, and the more he talks, the more desensitised his audience becomes towards even his most divisive remarks. This is why he goes to increasingly greater lengths of provocation in order to stay relevant and on message. Ranging from his anti-Mexican tirades, outspoken anti-Muslim pageantry, bullying remarks on violence, women, and foreign policy to his half-hearted condemnation of David Duke, the former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, the common denominator of what he says and what he does is a very idiosyncratic repetition of one message: I am not a politician, and *only I* can fix what is wrong with politics, because I am the only one who can say and do what is absolutely necessary.

As one would expect, the policy areas where this message can apply are demonstrably vast, whether it is banning Muslims visiting the US, endorsing torture as a necessary technique of extracting information, building a wall in the southern borders with Mexico, naming Mexican immigrants rapists, or hinting at the need to kill terrorists families. If hatred and violence are fuelled in the process of getting the job done, so be it; this is deemed a necessary evil in his quest to make America great again, as his campaign motto exclaims.

This implies that his suggested policies, however unpredictable or abhorrent, are only part of the problem with Mr. Trump. What completes the picture is the extreme willingness he has shown to step over anyone or anything that stands in the way of his pseudo 'Messianic' cause to reclaim what has been lost.

To his co-candidates, these inclinations have resulted both in repeated dismissals during the debates and ferocious attacks on the campaign trail. For example, his debate palette of 'You liar', 'Be quiet', 'You don't know much' and 'You're a basket case' have been coupled with political attacks of calling his main opponent, first time Senators Marco Rubio, a 'loser' and a 'choker' who does not have it in him to win in November. His applause lines rely on playing the harp of demagoguery, bigotry, irredentism and nativism, and evidently he has no issue targeting this rhetorical medley against his opponents.

### **A virtuoso in erratic delivery and maximum media exposure**

Instead of being a major disadvantage to him, Mr. Trump's chameleon-like political persona, his unerring certainty of the soundness of what he says (even if what he says is markedly different to what he had stated in the past) coupled with his inherent unpredictability provides the perfect cover for any mistakes he makes in his effort to take advantage of people's hopes and resentments. Many commentators have made the plausible case that his political persona is more flexible than that of any professional politician, in that whenever his policy recommendations to the disenfranchised suffer from lack of details, the power of his personality compensates for them, or rather it makes any complex situation look



amenable to an easy solution. Mr. Trump has repeatedly and very defiantly promised to 'knock out ISIS'. When quizzed about his strategy, he merely replied 'We will, believe me, we will'.<sup>2</sup>

This appears to protect him from being seen negatively by large parts of the (Republican) electorate for his systematic flip-flopping. Mr. Trump has the political acumen to appear not to take himself seriously when necessary and at the same time to boast about his seriousness when allowed to talk with sound-bites, all the while changing his position and delivering self-congratulatory remarks ad nauseam for doing so when cornered.

The fact that the usual laws of accountability and argumentative soundness do not apply to Mr. Trump to the same extent as other candidates in the 2016 Presidential race is also illustrated by the media reactions towards the barrage of gaffes and flip-flops that he has committed over the course of the campaign.

As a former reality-TV star that has mastered the playbook of the news cycle, Mr. Trump has shown an uncanny ability to get free media time due to his taste for sensationalism and drama, against a backdrop of opponents who are forced to raise funds for paid time. Shrewdly gaming the media for maximum exposure has also rendered him relatively immune to the fluctuations of the news cycle, and of his own debate performances. For example, Mr. Trump's performance in the last debate in Texas was heralded by many analysts as his worst in the race yet.<sup>3</sup> In response to that, however, he was able to immediately seize control of the media attention by announcing his endorsement by New Jersey Governor Chris Christie. This meant that his post-debate polling was only marginally affected, and movement in the Republican race was essentially negligible.

### **The Republican Party Pandemonium**

Following Mr. Trump's commanding showing on Super Tuesday and his efficiency in taking advantage of the primary and caucus rules of delegate appropriation, we now find ourselves in a situation where there is open talk within the Republican Party of a brokered convention, with candidates like Rubio and Cruz openly admitting that this scenario is the primary one upon which they base their nomination path.

Predictably, this scenario has been described by many Republican strategists as bleak. Due to the spectacular failure of the G.O.P. to stop Mr. Trump and the utter lack of consensus within the Party apparatus on how to proceed in the face of his primary successes (uniting behind one formidable, more establishment-friendly candidate, coalescing around Mr. Trump or taking the race onto the convention), one can argue that Mr. Trump's performance

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<sup>2</sup> 'Transcript of the Republican Presidential Debate in Houston', *The New York Times*, February 25, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/26/us/politics/transcript-of-the-republican-presidential-debate-in-houston.html>

<sup>3</sup> 'Donald Trump's Terrible Night', David A. Graham, *The Atlantic*, February 25, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/republican-debate-houston/471120/>



has exposed and enlarged the deep ideological fissures that have existed within the party. As David Axelrod, the Democratic strategist, has put it, ‘The Republicans are engaged in a full-out civil war, fundamentally riven by mistrust, and it is very hard to see how they put the pieces back together once this fight is done.’<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, as Mr. Trump’s performance illustrates his growing strength and appeal, the inner turmoil within the Party grows stronger as well. Ryan Lizza, the Washington correspondent of the *New Yorker*, has attributed this to a growing sense within the establishment that what Mr Trump is doing is a ‘hostile take-over of their Party’,<sup>5</sup> especially due to Mr. Trump’s willingness to take even on his own Party establishment in his quest to appear as an establishment nemesis.

In this sense, the agonising, if not frantic, attempts of various forces within the Party to confront and/or stop Mr. Trump cannot be attributed simply to the usual power arm-wrestling, but are rather rooted in a number of much deeper existential and ideological reasons. Mr. Trump’s ascendant candidacy therefore does not represent simply an analytical failure to predict and prevent on the part of the G.O.P., but rather an existential crisis about identity or core values.



For a party that has regularly invoked the Buckley rule, namely the rule promulgated by the late conservative icon William F. Buckley, Jr., which translates into something along the lines of “Nominate the most conservative candidate who is electable”, Mr. Trump’s candidacy has profoundly questioned many of the assumptions that have been long held about the Republican Party. Indeed, the Party establishment on Capital Hill and the old forces of the conservative movement are more than uncomfortable with the sheer unpredictability of Mr. Trump as a candidate, his very lack of a reliably conservative track record and the fear of where he would want to take the party and what that would mean for its short- and long-term electoral fortunes if he is nominated for the Presidency.

<sup>4</sup> ‘As Donald Trump Rolls Up Victories, the G.O.P. Split Widens to a Chasm’, Jonathan Martin and Michael Barbaro, *The New York Times*, March 1, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/02/us/politics/super-tuesday-primaries-presidential-election.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/02/us/politics/super-tuesday-primaries-presidential-election.html?_r=0)

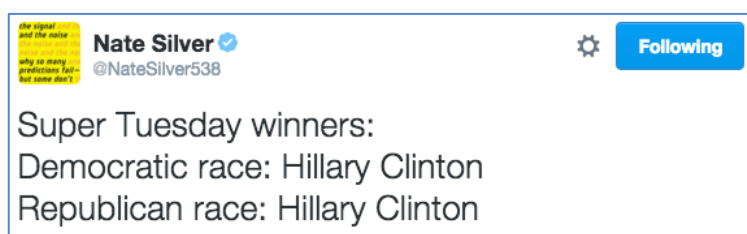
<sup>5</sup> ‘Donald Trump’s Hostile Takeover of the G.O.P.’, Ryan Lizza, *The New Yorker*, January 28, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/donald-trumps-hostile-takeover-of-the-g-o-p>

Yet, the iconoclasm of an ascendant Trump candidacy for the G.O.P. lies not only on the fact that his record is not sufficiently or reliably conservative, or that the Party has so far been unable to derail his campaign. These are acknowledged, albeit reluctantly, to be by-products of the Trump candidacy, or signs of the particularly weak position in which the Party finds itself in.

For the majority of the G.O.P. figures, operatives and donors, the most significant area where the hypothetical scenario of Mr. Trump clinching the Republican nomination would represent a severe case of breaking with the established status quo is that of electability.

Indeed, despite his appeal to parts of the Republican electorate, there is plenty of evidence to question the viability of a Trump candidacy in the general election, scheduled for November 8<sup>th</sup>. Mr. Trump's really high unfavourable ratings point to the fact that the breadth of his appeal is considerably limited amongst general election registered voters. In direct match-ups between the two Democratic candidates and Mr. Trump, the latter appears to be trailing both of them by a considerable gap, demonstrating his failure to gain traction with general election voters that will eventually decide the course of the election.<sup>6</sup> With so much at stake in the upcoming election, not least due to the open vacancy in the Supreme Court following the death of Justice Scalia, the mainstream wing of the G.O.P. is afraid that a Trump nomination would be the most direct way of handing an easy win to the Democrats.

Of course, the fear that Mr. Trump, if elected as the Party's nominee, will lead to an electoral fiasco is not restricted to the prospects of capturing the White House. As it is reported, Republicans that are running in other close races, such as for the US Senate, 'fear their party's new standard-bearer will wipe them out in November'.<sup>7</sup> As a reaction to this, for example, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Senate majority leader, has reportedly already delineated plans that would allow 'lawmakers [to] break with Mr. Trump explicitly in a general election'.<sup>8</sup> On a more long-term basis, there is also a deeply felt trepidation that the inherent bigotry attached to the Trump brand will place a stigma on the Republican Party's brand itself that will be very difficult, painstaking and time-consuming to get rid of.



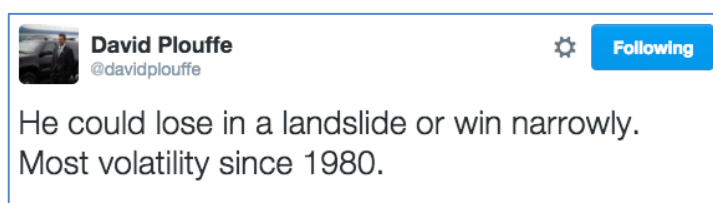
<sup>6</sup> For the latest such poll, see 'National poll: Clinton, Sanders both top Trump', *CNN*, March 2, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/03/01/politics/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-bernie-sanders-poll/>

<sup>7</sup> Trump's Super Tuesday win sets off GOP alarm bells, Ben Schreckinger, *Politico*, March 2, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/03/super-tuesday-donald-trump-220106#ixzz41pgTy0yz>

<sup>8</sup> 'Inside the Republican Party's Desperate Mission to Stop Donald Trump', Alexander Burns, Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Martin, *The New York Times*, February 27, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/donald-trump-republican-party.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/donald-trump-republican-party.html?_r=0)

Nonetheless, this should provide no consolation for the Democratic Party. Mr. Trump's instinct for the jugular, his contempt for clarity and rational argumentation, his adeptness at riding the political momentum of frustration and giving voice to the politics of rage in an almost unfiltered manner - all attributes that propelled him to the front seat in the Republican race - can prove problematic in the months to come. His candidacy poses a deleterious, diluting effect on the entirety of the political system and his incendiary discourse will have a general effect on the playbook by which the political game is played at least until November 8th, and perhaps beyond that. This could well be the reason why the existing gap between him and both Democratic candidates, as it is currently stands now in the polls, could wither soon.

Ultimately, turning his invective towards the eventual Democratic nominee might fail, but his discourse coupled with the establishment money and support by (at least some of) the Party intelligentsia, operatives and donors that will come if he gets the nomination, might make this a very close race, and admittedly one with severe ramifications for the country and the world in general. As David Plouffe, Barack Obama's former campaign manager and communications guru, tweeted '[Trump] could lose in a landslide or win narrowly'. Tapping into the anti-establishment fervour might not be enough at first sight to win a general election, but it would be a serious mistake to underestimate the lengths Mr. Trump would go to prove this estimate wrong.



### Time is running out

If the primary season so far can be likened to a football match, it is clear that Mr. Trump wants the game to finish as soon as possible, and his opponents are interested in a tie, that would take them into overtime. Super Tuesday took us one step closer to deciphering the desires of the 2016 Republican electorate, and it would be an understatement to say that smugness and dismay have finally turned into alarm within the Republican Party. But the fact of the matter remains that there are increasing signs that at least a part of the US would like to 'hire' Trump as their next President, based on his rhetorical bravado of monotonous ad hominem slurs, his Quixotean claims about American exceptionalism, his demagogic





promises to an almost all-white audience of the furious and the fed-up, and his unapologetic divisive brand of politics.

Whatever one's politics, it has to be underlined that Mr. Trump could take America on a dangerous journey. Now that the math indicates that his path towards the nomination appears to be more solid than it has ever been since the beginning of the primary season, it is becoming increasingly apparent that his candidacy poses serious risks not only for the long-term perspectives of the G.O.P., but also for the US political system in general and its internal dynamics of checks and balances.

In this sense, if Mr. Trump succeeds in bullying his way to the nomination and then the White House, it will be a feat of individual ingenuity but also one of profound collective failure. For a US electorate that has not fatigued up to now from his non-stop incitement of hatred and violence and that is increasingly contemplating the potential of 'hiring' him, Mr. Trump's famous TV line 'You're fired' should become the motto for the next months.

For the choice of voters and leaders is not one of preference among various candidates; it rather constitutes an existential choice about the path that they want their country to take. The wild card of an ascendant Trump candidacy might have presented a nightmare becoming an ever-increasing possibility, but there can be no sense of fatalism around this issue, as there is still time to prevent it from becoming reality.