

# **AFJ Report**

**Peter Roff talks about America No.4**

***South Carolina, Nevada Set the Field***

**By**

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ASIAN FORUM JAPAN

Last week's South Carolina Republican Primary and Democrats' Nevada Caucus provided much needed clarity to the most confusing, disorganized U.S. presidential contest in several generations. Unfortunately being able to see the train wreck coming doesn't make things any better. On the Republican side New York real estate developer Donald J. Trump has secured, at least for the moment, his status as front-runner. He leads in the delegate count and followed his second place finish in Iowa with convincing wins in New Hampshire and South Carolina. Nipping at his heels are Texas Sen. Ted Cruz and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, but at a distance. If either one were to drop out of the race the other might have a chance to surpass Trump in the delegate count before the Cleveland convention but that is considered by most people who follow U.S. elections closely to be an unlikely outcome. The current presumption is that most all of former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush's financial network will now go to Rubio, which means he can go the distance as the quote un-quote establishment favorite.

Among Democrats it is now clear that former Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton will take her party's nomination no matter how the rank and file votes. Clinton and Sanders are neck and neck as far as actually votes cast are concerned – they each have 51 pledged delegates - but she has a built in safeguard that should protect her, even from a Sanders surge thanks to the party regulars who are considered “super-delegates” to the national convention by virtue of the position they hold and who do not have to compete for a seat in a state delegation. She has 451 of them as opposed to just 19 for the junior senator from Vermont. Unless something as unlikely as a federal indictment over her handling of her email while she was a member of President Barack Obama's cabinet derails her entire campaign, she's going to be the nominee - unless she isn't.

The lack of predictability in the race is aligned closely with the general uncertain about the future of America that the activist, populist wings in both parties feel. The malaise that has settled over the nation thanks to Obama's mishandling of the American economy has a larger-than-usual share of the electorate in an uproar over the idea of continuing business as usual. On the right these feelings are manifested in the demands by about a third of primary voters for swift and tough action on illegal immigration; on the left it appears as an outright assault on the financial sector, particularly the big banks, and against Wall Street. Trump and Sanders are winning their votes from here. Clinton, Cruz, and Rubio are getting theirs from more traditionally minded voters although Mrs. Clinton's failure to carry in New Hampshire any bloc other than Democrats over 65

or those making more than \$200,000 per year should be a cause for great concern within her campaign.

With all the sniping that has been going on there has been little time for substantive discussions about the real issues, issues like economic growth, tax and budget policy, national security needs and, above all else, free trade between nations, the extension of which may be the most important geo-economic issue of the current age.

The candidates in both parties are, to be sure, talking around them or bringing them up in broad generalizations but there is no real indication as yet what kind of president either Trump or Clinton would be based on what they are saying on the stump. Long on rhetoric, short on specifics may be the hallmark of stump speeches in the age of the Internet and instant communications but they do little in inform the electorate of a candidate's intentions.

The results of the upcoming March 1 contests in Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont and Virginia will have a lot to say about the how the rest of the nominating process will unfold. Delegates will be awarded on a proportional basis, with 595 delegates at stake for the GOP (24 percent of the 2,472 total delegates throughout the country) and 1,004 delegates for the Democrats (21 percent of the 4,763 convention delegates). On the one hand a strong finish by Trump in these contests could wipe out his competitors – but that would require him to rise above the roughly 30 percent ceiling he appears to have.

If he can't, and more total votes go to Cruz, Rubio, and others than go to him then Trump may find he arrives in Cleveland with the most pledged delegates but not enough to win on the first ballot, after which all delegates are released and free to vote as they choose. This is why all the talk of a brokered GOP convention must be taken more seriously than in years past. Meanwhile Mrs. Clinton will continue her march toward Philadelphia and victory, a victory that eluded her eight years ago because her team focused on winning contests rather than winning delegates. She has not made that mistake a second time.

- Peter Roff is a visiting scholar at Asian Forum Japan. A former longtime American political operative, Mr. Roff now writes for a variety of news U.S. news outlets and is commentator on cable television and radio.