

AFJ Report

Peter Roff talks about America No.5

And Now It Begins

By

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The ballots have been counted. The balloons have dropped. The nominees have been chosen and the party conventions have adjourned. The race for president of the United States, surely the strangest in recent memory, has winnowed its way down from nearly twenty candidates to four.

New York real estate developer Donald J. Trump and former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton may be the most unpopular figures to ever secure a the nomination of a major party. Each of them is disliked, intensely, by members of the opposing party and by some within their own electoral coalitions. And that dislike, as profound as it runs deep is highly personal.

For this reason we cannot for the moment discount the candidacies of Gary Johnson, the former Republican governor of Mexico now running atop the Libertarian Party ticket or of Dr. Jill Stein, who is heading up the U.S. Green Party's effort.

Neither is likely to win. It is questionable whether either will demonstrate enough support to get into any of the presidential debates. What they can do, however, is play the role of spoiler in an election that most observers believe is likely to be very close, at least in terms of the popular vote.

For the most part though the focus will be on Trump and Clinton – each of whom are bidding for the votes of their own base as well as the for the support of the disaffected voters in the other party.

In a sense this was predictable. Mrs. Clinton first came to prominence (if not actual power) alongside her husband who was running for president as an anti-progressive. That she has embraced the progressive Obama agenda strikes many in the Democrats' electoral coalition as a late-term conversion necessary in order for her to win it all.

Trump, meanwhile, is a cypher. He may mean everything he says or none of it. No one is sure – which is why some conservatives and some moderates are having a difficult time with him. His outlandish remarks may simply be a campaign tactic to gain control of the debate and keep things focused on what he wants to talk about: trade imbalances, national debt, terrorism, and other threats from abroad doing harm to American greatness. It's not clear where he is on issues that have been a standard part of the GOP playbook for almost three decades. What is clear is his appeals to disaffected working class voters of all races – not just whites as the American media would have people believe – scrambles the traditional electoral map. His refusal to engage in debates over so-called social issue may produce narrower than typical victory margins in solidly Republican states like Georgia and Mississippi but it puts states that have spent much of the last 30 years in economic

distress like Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut in play. It's a risky trade off but one at this point worth making since the traditional Republican campaign that is heavy on its appeal to conservative Christians in the south and Midwest does not bring along enough states to win.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich recently observed in his weekly column that what America has just seen is, in essence, two conventions for two different audiences. People who think the country is doing well and moving forward probably liked what the Democrats had to say. People who think the country is in a bad place and headed for a worse one, however, were drawn more to the rhetoric coming from the rostrum at the Republican convention.

As a matter of sentiment the place where that analysis runs into trouble for the Democrats is in the most basic of trends. Pick the poll but an alarming 70 percent of American voters more or less believe the country is on the wrong track. Only 25 percent give or take, believe it is headed in the right direction.

If this is true then the Democrats' plan has a fundamental flaw. Most people do not agree with them that – even if they could be better - things right now are good. This is why they are engaged in a vehement assault on Trump and his character, his fitness to be commander-in-chief, his intellect, his business dealings and just about everything else they can get their hands on. Their mission is to drive his negatives into the stratosphere so that no sane person, as they see it, could ever vote for him.

It's a strategy they tried at least once before, in 1980 – when an embattled and unpopular incumbent faced off against a challenger not known to most of America outside of his daily radio program, his years in Hollywood, and his work touring the country on behalf of General Electric, whose television program he hosted for many years.

In reality what they did was set for Ronald Reagan a very low bar that he eventually cleared easily with one remark in their lone debate that finished off Jimmy Carter for good. Trump has the capacity to do the same. Whether he has the discipline is another question entirely.

Of course everything depends on being able to deliver your voters to the polls during the election period – which has grown from a single day to a period nearly a month in length thanks to the way both parties but particularly the Democrats make use of early voting. At the moment the Clinton organization is strong whereas the Trump organization is virtually non-existent. There is no substitute for knocking on doors. A general election campaign heavy on television advertising just doesn't cut it anymore (if it indeed ever did). The voters want to see you or at least your

representatives come through the neighborhood. The Obama campaign elevated this to high art. The Clinton machine is a close second now while Trump still relies on his ability to stir people up and get to the polls under their own steam. In order to win, and winning is a very real possibility for the man few people thought could even get to Super Tuesday when he first announced, the Republicans have to have a ground game that is at least as good as what the Democrats can do. Right now, however, that's a tall order.

The polls reflect the mood of the country, meaning either candidate can win. Barring some unforeseen event it's all going to come down to tactics.

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