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Clowns to the Left, Jokers to the Right: The 2016 Presidential Campaign in Two Books

Abstract

In this essay, two books are first reviewed. The first, Trump's *Great Again*, gives us a glimpse into the winning 2016 presidential campaign. The second, *What Happened* by Hillary Clinton, presents the memoir of the losing candidate. Having reviewed both, the essay then delves into a critical commentary on the election, ultimately making the claim that the perceived and obvious inauthenticity of Clinton was less effective than the perceived authenticity of Trump, a lesson that the Democrats would do well to learn for 2020.

Keywords

Clinton, Trump, 2016 Election, Presidential Election, Memoirs

Cover Page Footnote

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As the political shock of a generation has begun to ebb into the daily shock of an administration more concerned with the personal aggrandizement of the commander in chief than policy of any kind as well as a Democratic Party searching for an identity in the face of a new political reality, academics are left, as are many concerned citizens, with making sense of the last year with an eye on making political strategy for the future. Recently, both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump have released books telling their stories of the campaign. Well, sort of. Clinton released her memoir of the campaign and her political life more broadly, *What Happened*, in mid-September of 2017 while Trump re-released a 2015 book, *Crippled America*, as *Great Again* in July of 2017. This essay aims to review both of the books as well as develop a critical commentary on both in an attempt to hazard a guess at why one of these authors has retitled his book in an apparent victory lap while the other is left explaining her failed campaign to herself and the rest of the world.

I begin, as the supposed author (I suspect a ghostwriter given the difference in diction between the book, which is surprisingly cogent, and the often-incoherent speeches to which we are subjected on a daily basis) himself would likely insist on going first as the victor, with *Great Again*. Given the strange, bellicose campaign after which this book was released, *Great Again* begins with a surprisingly routine, safe choice for a presidential memoir: a quote by Lincoln.¹ Of course, this quote, focusing on preparing for the presidency, is quickly twisted into a metaphor comparing the running of a construction company to running a nation. Such is a major theme of the work as a whole: take standard political fare and twist it, well past the breaking point, to fit the personal imaginary of the Trump mindset, with a heavy dose of conservative buzzwords. Despite the commonplace treatment of Trump and Trumpism as a kind of aberration from mainstream Republican politics, much of the work is, as it was in *Crippled America*, simply a statement of the Republican platform. Chapter three, for instance, rehashes the standard argument about illegal immigrants stealing jobs from “real Americans,” committing crimes, draining the welfare system, necessitating tougher immigration policy. Here again, Trump cannot help but leave his grandiose mark: where other Republicans- to make no mention of the Obama administration- have only jailed and deported, he, and only he, has the bravery to build a wall. A similar case is to be found in chapter four: after berating silly bureaucrats who think it takes years of study and thought to conduct international diplomacy. Trump has the answer: bellicosity and military spending. Once again twisting a presidential quote, this time Theodore Roosevelt’s, the president muses about the utility of speaking softly if one has a big stick; it seems one can get away with talking “bigly.”² Education as the right of the states and the states alone, climate change denial, and a cursory spitting at Obamacare comprise chapters five through seven. The standard GOP buffet continues in chapters eight through fourteen, stating the conservative movement as the home for American values and blaming overregulation on supposedly poor economy performance, aging infrastructure, and the moral degradation of the American spirit. Chapter ten gives the reader a break with a sixteen-page photo album of Trump, his family, and his buildings (framed to make the buildings look even more phallic and imposing than the tiny hands jokes from the campaign may explain). The policy content of the book is likely the least interesting aspect of the work; most of it is simply a reiteration of mainline GOP policy which has varied little since the Reagan administration. It is a work that is unabashedly pro-business which worships wealth and maintains the standard right-wing blind spots on the politics of race

¹Trump, Donald. *Great Again*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 201, ix. The quote from Lincoln is, “I will study and prepare, and perhaps my chance will come.”

² Ibid 32

and class in the United States. Where the book, much like the campaign, becomes much more interesting is in those elements that make it uniquely Trump.

Much of the margins of the work focuses on the accomplishments of its author. For example, the “About The Author” chapter (in most such works a page or so suffices) is fifteen pages long, detailing in both prose and in list the vast real estate empire, authorial chops, and wealth of Trump. It would be easy to dismiss the book as the self-absorbed ramblings of a narcissist. That would be neither productive beyond catharsis nor particularly enlightening. Rather, it is the goal here to treat the book as a glimpse into the mind of the person who eventually became President of the United States of America. For that reason alone, it makes sense to take the book seriously; enough people in the right places, for one reason or another, made their choice last November.

If one is willing to overlook the elements of the work, which are admittedly most of the book, that are either trite or grandiose, a few shocking moments of self-awareness emerge, hinting at some of the reasons that the Trump campaign was, indeed, successful. In one such moment, the author plainly states that getting the media, who is the enemy, mad enough to do all of your advertising for free is just good economic sense in the context of a presidential campaign.³ Considering that the Clinton campaign outspent the Trump campaign by a considerable margin, this is hard to dispute.⁴ Striking a tone that seems at odds with the public bellicosity of the man in his day to day life, Trump even takes several pages to make his case that, while he sticks up for himself, what he really wants is to make Americans feel understood.⁵ Such as statement, taken within the broader context of the campaign in which one of the grand narratives was of an outsider (a point made early and often in the book), should give pause to even the harshest of Trump critics: in a roundabout way, if one is in some ways blind to the class and race politics of the GOP platform, there seems to be an attempt at listening those same Real Americans in the flyover states which won the election. Trump is offering to his readers a new way of doing things: a supposed meritocracy that actually cares about and serves the people, a strong opposition to the political elites and their media puppets.⁶ By itself, *Great Again* offers some small insights into some possible reasons we now have a President Trump. But that is only half the story. Trump ran against Clinton, and her story is vital to a fuller understanding of the outcome.

What Happened is a very different sort of book than its right-leaning competition, though both come from the same publishing house. Clinton’s book, much like her campaign, is a paint-by-numbers, safe, palatable memoir. It is the literary equivalent of a latte one would expect to find at any chain café on the planet: lukewarm, bland, and presented with a forced smile. Each chapter, focusing on various themes from the candidate’s upbringing to navigating the space of being a woman in American politics, begins with one quote or another that one would expect to find, and discard on a daily basis, from a tear-off desktop calendar.⁷ Such a pattern begins each segment of the book with an eerie feeling of inauthenticity that, sadly, characterizes much of the book. To be fair, some of the personal moments are poignant. One such early moment, her

³ Ibid 11.

⁴ Allison, Bill, Mira Rojanasakul, Brittany Harris, and Cedric Sam. "Tracking the 2016 Presidential Money Race." Bloomberg. Accessed November 27, 2017. <https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/graphics/2016-presidential-campaign-fundraising/>.

⁵ Trump 89-95.

⁶ Ibid 135-142.

⁷ One such gem, from pg. 242, quotes Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in stating that “well-behaved women seldom make history.”

description of sitting through the inauguration of her opponent, makes even more visceral the sinking-gut feelings that a majority of the voting population has felt since last November.⁸ Much in the same way that the mainline GOP points of Trump's book will ring sweetly in the ears of those on the right of the political spectrum, Hillary's having to sit through the inauguration of her opponent strikes the clearly intended chord with the intended audience of the book: those looking to engage in catharsis in the wake of Clinton's loss. Clinton does not outline much policy in her book; it is a work of reflection after a campaign rather than a sales pitch. What makes the book remarkable are the attempts at relating to the reader, which begin to tell one of the two critical stories I find worth telling in this short format. As any good pollster would tell you, Americans love their pizza. There are preferences: Chicagoans like theirs thick, New Yorkers like theirs thin, and most of us simply like it affordable and without pretension. The Democratic nominee in the 2016 race likes hers with a few fresh jalapenos... delivered to her private plane.⁹ As a one-off incident, such an artificial attempt at relating to Americans through ultra-bourgeois gaffes would be almost endearing; after all, Clinton has been in the public eye for nearly her entire adult life so she is not a stranger to most Americans of voting age. However, there seems to be a pattern. Setting aside the decades of scandal between President Clinton and Madame Secretary Clinton in the marital sphere, the feminine Clinton makes her case for it being tough to be a woman in American politics. There is, in fact, a whole chapter devoted to this end and it makes a great deal of sense in view of liberal feminist scholarship and activism: women are frequently silenced, accused of hormonal outbursts, and called pejorative terms for the same acts that earn male counterparts praise.¹⁰ Again, however, the important political message is swept out to sea with the tone-deafness of the author's attempts at relating to her readers. In this instance, it is apparently a great shame that the task of managing the household staff, who were called "the help" in previous generations, fell to poor Hillary. One can almost picture being asked to dictate a passive aggressive note to Bill on the way to a gala about what a pain it is to have to coordinate the private assistants, household staff, and gardeners, all by herself.

There is some attempt to take responsibility for the loss of the election in Clinton's book. The overall tone indicates a massive grief, a loss that will likely affect the author of the rest of her life. A careful reader catches glimpses of melancholy and at times, even something like rage at the helplessness at watching what looked like a sure thing evaporate into unrequited aspirations. Clinton's impulse to retreat to a rural home and recuperate with a favorite television show and a few glasses of wine is, in a rare moment, an authentic piece of memoir that provides a human face to the artificiality that is to be found in much of the work. What responsibility the author does take for the outcome of the election does, indeed, fall flat. This is due to the early, often, and overdone mentions of: the FBI, Comey, the Republicans, the American Public, women, Russians, the media, etc. as factors in her loss. It is factually correct to assert that, indeed, there may well have been outside factors at play in the election. With that in mind, the constant repetition plays like "Smells Like Teen Spirit" stuck in a CD player. It is a message that only sounds good to those looking to hear the same the same music that they have been listening to since 1992 and nauseates most everyone else and has lost any edge it once had. Clinton lost the campaign, she argues, *but* it was not really her fault. The oddest moment of the book, as many other reviewers have noted, is the downright wrong analysis of *1984*, coming to the conclusion that we should simply follow the advice of insiders and governmental experts when it comes to

⁸Clinton, Hillary. *What Happened*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017, 4-6.

⁹ Ibid 92

¹⁰ Ibid 111-145

our welfare.¹¹ Such utter disconnect from political reality, at this point at its extreme, is representative of the larger problem with the book and the modern Democratic Party: it is so assured of its own correctness that it conflates political conversations with monologues.

That these two books are different should surprise no one who has been paying attention to American politics of late. A passing familiarity with the authors, or even the presence of a pulse, would have the reader hazarding a guess that Trump would take a triumphal waltz through his own policy agenda and accomplishments while Hillary facilitates between morning and blame. What is somewhat of a surprise, and is the second critical story to be told in this essay, is the remarkable similarities between the works and the campaigns from which they stem. Both focus around the overblown personalities of their authors. Both, very clearly, want their readers to like and understand them: both include occasional stories of childhoods, personal struggles, and successes. These are, of course, the standard fare of the typical biography. What makes it a fascinating parallel in this particular instance is that the two authors, who were so fervently opposed to each other, end up telling us the same tales: a life begun of modest means (though modest is a relative term in the case of Trump), through hard work, which ended up at the door to the most coveted office on the planet. The difference in how that story is told, in my analysis, represents one of the key reasons for the outcome of last year's election.

Both candidates tell us stories that are, at their core, American: the achievement of ambition through hard work and the sweat of one's brow is key to the American ethos. In the grand scheme of class politics in America, the two folks running were not as different as their rhetoric may have made it seem: they are uber-wealthy people who have become adept at playing the system in which the elites make the rules. The longstanding personal relationship between the families prior to the campaign makes this case without the need for tinfoil hat conspiracies. Given that the stories are, if one is willing to look past the bravado of Trump, similar, the difference is that one of the candidates is, at the very least, clear in his public personality, rather than trying, and failing, to make us believe that she is one of us.

Donald Trump is rich. Very rich. Stupendously rich. And he uses these riches to build monuments to himself all over the world; he does not try to hide this from his audience. In fact, it is front and (literally, in the picture section) center to the Trump persona. Where Clinton tries to downplay her riches, her disconnect from the average American, Trump leans in. He ran the campaign, and runs the White House, with an open image of immense wealth and an utter lack of a filter. This is, I argue, the main basis of his support. Trump parrots, most of the time, mainline republican rhetoric on most policies, but not through the painted-on smiles and flowery words of a politician; he speaks in the language of the common person, of huge walls and great deals. And though the plans may smell of snake oil, Trump at the very least claims that while he is rich, it is his job as president to make it possible for others to join him in the ranks of the wealthy; this tactic comes straight from the American bootstraps ethos documented from Weber to Reich. In a perverse way, Trump is the triumphant individual many Americans see themselves as truly bring were they free of the fetters of a government that many see as having left them behind in the Rust Belt and flyover states.¹²

These two books represent, in several ways, the state of the current American political system. Both major parties represent the ultra-wealthy class; that much is clear in both Trump's self-flattery and Clinton's failed attempts to relate to the average American. The major difference is in how the parties, and the campaigns which carried the banners, manage the clear

¹¹ Ibid 9

¹² Trump 159-169

representational disconnect. The Democrats do so by telling ever-strained stories attempting to build solidarity. This served to drive low turnout on election day: telling Americans that it is so hard to be Hillary Clinton only goes so far when most of us have not seen an effective raise in a generation. Yes, the Democrats appeal to many on social issues, immigration, and general presentation when compared to the Republican platform, but the lack of actual policy to back up the stories of how much like us the candidate really is, led many to simply stay home and actively put off many blue-collar Americans. The modern Democratic Party, at the presidential level, reads much like *What Happened*: plastic, corporate, and palatable mainly to those who have already been buying the newest iteration of the iDemocrat since the first Clinton administration. Donald Trump has not lived a life like most of us: he has wealth that almost none of us will ever achieve, and he tells us so. But in so doing he does not pretend to be us: he is rich and we are not and he does not attempt to hide this. Rather, in a capitalist phantasm of Noblesse Oblige, the real estate tycoon claims that he, and he alone, can show us the way to riches ourselves. Herein lies the appeal of the Trump campaign; rather than telling Americans about the progress of the last administration and attempting to relate to us through flat stories clearly written by a team of pollsters, Trump is raw, off-the-cuff, and distinctly himself. Many disagree with his stance on immigration, economics, foreign and domestic policy. But few can say that they do not have some idea of who the authentic Trump is: grandiose, often inflammatory, and quick to say what is exactly on his mind. The Clinton campaign was measured, polled, focused grouped and, ultimately, an electoral failure. Trump ran and governs without a filter. Beyond policy, the race for the White House is a contest of personalities, and, as these two books serve to illustrate, Americans have a fine nose for an inauthentic, plastered-on political persona and will reject it even in favor of a political amateur that at least campaign as himself rather than as a character of the tailor-made candidate. At the very least, Trump managed to convince enough people, in the right places for the Electoral College, that his absurd character, a billionaire tycoon who is comfortable eating taco salads and speaking “his” mind in the same dialect that has made him the ideological companion of white nationalists and trolls, was the real Trump. Whether this is the “real” Trump is irrelevant: it was the Trump that some Americans were looking for to articulate their rage: rage against the feelings that their ideas of racial superiority, of bootstraps economics, of an America that used to be great when it was whiter, more masculine, and had fuller hairlines, were no longer acceptable. Clinton made a different strategic choice, opting instead to state only that which had been focus-grouped, vetted by experts, polled to death and regurgitated as a plastic-flavored personality and platform that failed to carry her to a victory she thought she had already won. What is certain is that the perceived inauthenticity of the Clinton worked less well than the perceived authenticity of Trump among their respective bases of support. Whether or not the Democratic Party will recognize this in 2020, on the other hand, is much less certain.