

From "Existential Threat" To Political Partner: A Miraculous Transformation Norman Birnbaum  
Washington 22 September The Pope arrives in Washington today. With traffic expected to descend into total chaos instead of the partial chaos prevailing on ordinary days, and with our Metro (U Bahn) system extremely prone to disruptions, many citizens will wisely stay at home. They can indulge their masochism, after all, without leaving their television sets---by following in detail the Republican contest for the Presidential nomination. The latest developments include a particularly shameful episode. Dr. Carson, the Afro-American neurosurgeon who declares that he is especially qualified to become President since he is so new to(i.e. knows so little about) public affairs, has declared that no Muslim should be President. No Muslim is running, but the remark is not entirely gratuitous. It is an attempt to make inroads on territory hitherto occupied by the morally unwashed billionaire, Trump. He has been appealing to the twenty (or perhaps twenty five) percent of the electorate which knows, all evidence to the contrary, that the President was born in Keyna (and therefore ineligible for the Presidency)---and a Muslim, despite his regular attendance at Church. These people are not only full of hatred of difference, they are obsessed. One of them in New Hampshire asked Trump what he intended to do about Obama's plans to jail a good deal of the white population. Instead of recommending that the citizen seek psychiatric treatment, the candidate undertook to pursue the question. Carson's appropriation of these hatreds is revolting. As an Afro-American, he profited from great American traditions of openness and tolerance.

Trump did not do so well in the televised debate of last week, and now faces a challenge from Ms. Carly Fiorina, the businesswoman who once headed Hewlett-Packard, the electronic firm. Ms. Fiorina had no brilliant record there, and was dismissed by its board---but, of course, she is campaigning not least on her capacity to bring sound business practices to government. (One gathers that there may be a very senior vacancy at Volkswagen shortly: Ms. Fiorina's record of mismanagement surely renders her eligible for the top floor at Wolfsburg.)Actually, she has run for the Senate from California and was decisively defeated. She treats references to that as a form of lese majeste. It remains to be seen if her bid to become an American Margaret Thatcher will go very far.

These are our problems and we will either solve them or succumb to them,. There is one aspect of the Republican campaign, however, which should be of particular interest to our European friends. The panel when dealing with foreign and military matters displayed chauvinistic aggressiveness and political ignorance in equal measure---so much so that Jeb Bush, defending his family's record, appeared almost (but not quite) rational. The Republicans, of course, depicted President Obama and his former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton----very possibly the Democratic candidate---as incompetent weaklings, afraid to confront the nation's enemies, if not manifesting a good deal of sympathy for them. The President of China is to follow the Pope to Washington, and one Republican candidate voiced his incomprehension that he will be guest at a White House dinner. Macdonald's was suggested as a plausible alternative. I am old enough to have endured the first years of the Cold War, when the pathological hostility of the alcoholic anti-Communist, Senator McCarthy, shocked President Eisenhower into restoring a measure of proportion in foreign affairs. He did not, after all, intervene in 1953 in the DDR, in 1954 in what was French Indo-China and was later to become Vietnam, and in 1956 in Hungary. Contemporary Republicans know no such restraint. They are proud of their readiness to

fight anyone, at anyplace, and at any time. To be sure, they show no inclination to assume responsibility. When, two years ago, the President indicated he would ask the Congress to vote on the military intervention in Syria its members were so loudly demanding, their battle cries suddenly changed into diffident coughs.

The arrogance of the Republicans knows no bounds. One of them, Senator Cruz of Texas (son of a Protestant preacher from Cuba not too appreciative of the country which took him in, since he thinks we are sinful in teaching evolution in schools, and in pursuing science generally) recently told the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dempsey, that he was wrong in his judgment that a military intervention in Syria would be costly and uncertain. Our Admirals and Generals, usually, are painfully aware that since 1945, most of our military operations have been failures. That is too much for the primitive nationalists in the Congress to acknowledge and they manifest a magical belief in American military and political omnipotence. The language of their new hero, Trump, is saturated with references to strength and denunciations of others as weak---a quite striking revenant of Nazi and fascist rhetoric, all the more telling since Trump most certainly has not done much reading in the scholarly literature on the recent past.

One does not have to be a primitive to participate in our national narcissism. Plenty of academics, journalists, officials who have graduated from our very good universities act as if they had been indoctrinated rather than educated. I am reminded of a national hero of a century and one half ago, Professor Joshua Chamberlain of Bowdoin College in Maine. He was a professor of classical studies without military experience, joined the Union army in 1861, fought in several battles and at Gettysburg in 1863 was in command of a Maine regiment. They held a position called Little Round Top at the end of the Union line, and were repeatedly stormed by Confederate units seeking to seize the hill and turn the line. At the end of an exhausting day of battle, the Maine regiment ran out of ammunition. Chamberlain led a downhill bayonet charge which beat back the Confederates---and saved the Union army. Were Chamberlain with us today, he would spare himself, in all probability, the tedious experience of battle and concentrate on writing opinion pieces in The Washington Post calling for resolution and what I believe is termed in German "wehrhaft" behavior.

My late friend Herbert Marcuse once declared: "reality is its own caricature." That is certainly true of our political scene, which seems to be an exaggerated version of a critical television film about the nation's pathologies. It is in this setting that our well read and intelligent President and his advisors have to fend off disaster. In the years before he became President, amongst the matter he read was the critical historiography of empire. The President in his autobiography briefly notes having attended, when studying at Columbia University and later working in New York, the meetings of the dissenting academy (then The Socialist Scholars Conference and now The Left Forum.) Those of us who have been criticising our imperial hubris for decades can be sure that the President has read our writings. The previous incumbent who did so was John Kennedy (Carter did some reading and Clinton may well have delegated the task, very likely to Sidney Blumenthal.) That is certainly true of Secretary of State Kerry,, who as Senator from Massachusetts for many years had close contact with his state's universities, home to successive generations of critical scholars and scientists.

The President has just enjoyed a very large victory in beating back the Congressional opponents of the agreement with Iran. That represents the most severe defeat ever inflicted on the Israel lobby by an American President. The public battle over the arrangement with Iran also illuminated the fault lines within the American Jewish community: a majority of Jewish Congress members and Senators voted with the President and refused to align with the Jewish organizations, utterly obedient to the Israel government. Their memberships add up to about twenty percent, no more, of American Jewry. Gestures of reconciliation with Netanyahu have followed, of course, and Israel will be given more weapons which are utterly useless in its actual struggles with the Palestinians. Obama's success makes more political boldness, that is, more distance from Israel's colonialist party, possible for his successor. The President's antagonists, to be sure, are still seeking to sabotage the agreement. An improbable accession of realism might induce Netanyahu to ask them to desist---but the lesson will not have been lost on his successor.

The resumption of diplomatic relations with Cuba (even if the Congress will refuse to have an Ambassador sent to Havana) is a Presidential triumph of large dimensions as well. The President relied on the support of a younger generation of Cuban Americans, who do not share their parents' illusions of reclaiming their properties in Cuba. Freer access to Cuba for citizens of the US will do rather more to bring critical movement to the surface of Cuban society than ritualized denunciations of its residual authoritarianism. The role in the negotiations between Cuba and the US assumed by the Vatican is portentous in itself. A de facto alliance of Obama with Pope Francis represents a convergence of American political Protestantism with its burdens of conscience, and Catholic conceptions of solidarity. The apprehension with which many Republicans regard the Pope (one has already announced that he will not attend His Holiness' address to the Congress, since the Pope is abusing his office to promote radical environmentalism), their fear that he will encourage Catholics to become more critical of the market, which he clearly does not depict as the supremely moral and omniscient human institution, is evident. As far as the Republicans are concerned, the sooner His Holiness returns to Rome, the better. The fact remains: the immigrant millions so despised by the Republicans, as well as a younger generation of American born Catholic intellectuals and political activists, are the potential shock troops of the next wave of social advance in the US.

No sooner will the Pope leave than the Chinese President will arrive. The President Has resisted calls for military confrontation with China over its extended claims of sovereignty off its coast. One wonders how the proponents of an aggressive American military presence in the western Pacific would respond to Chinese military alliances (and the provision of military bases) with Canada, Mexico, and Ecuador. World War Two began for the US in the Pacific, and it would be extremely unwise of the Europeans to ignore the historical dimensions and conflictual possibilities of relations between an ascending China and a US struggling with a change in the balance of global power. The President, born in Hawaii and raised for some time in Indonesia before returning to Hawaii and then studying in California, requires no instruction about the importance of Asia. In discussions with the Chinese President, he will clearly seek a modus vivendi---cooperation (as on climate and the economy)---where it is possible, agreements to disagree where it is not (Chinese sovereignty conflicts with the Asian nations connected to the US.) Civil

and human rights in China are the concern of vocal groups in US civil society, and whatever else the President may intend in his sixteen months of office, a rupture with China is not on his agenda.

There remains the region which since the beginning of historical memory has been the graveyard of empires, the Mideast. The President has substantially reduced the US military presence there---and has resorted to attacks by drones and airplanes in a situation in which total or near total withdrawal is politically impossible. Instead, he has concentrated on the minimalisation of the US military engagement in the Mideast and (insofar as possible) encouraging the region's nations to assume more of the burdens of constructing short and longer term truces in their endemic conflicts. The encouragement to democratization of the Cairo speech may in the long run prove prophetic. In the short run, there are no foreseeable ways in which the process can move forward. The President has chosen to avoid marching into new defeats under old illusions.

In an earlier article, I reported on the White House suggestion, implicit but quite effective, to the newly designated senior military commander, that he modify his rhetorical belligerence (he had depicted Russia as an "existential threat" to the US.) Barely a week ago, Secretary Kerry was publicly inquiring of Foreign Minister Lavrov what Russia intended by its arms and troop movements to Syria. Now the US Secretary of Defense and his Russian colleague, for the first time in a very long while, have spoken. Some form of military and political collaboration in Syria between the US and Russia is in preparation. The President, ignoring the preposterously inflated demands of the American war party, is at one with an inarticulate American majority in seeing no point to another interminable and unsuccessful military operation in the Mideast. In the Ukraine, the President and Kerry have changed a potential flash point into a continuing problem---not least, by allowing the EU and Germany in particular to keep the Minsk talks on perpetual life support. The US can be faulted, however, for its wretchedly small offer re Mideastern refugees. The Congress, of course, may block even the modest numbers now proposed by Kerry. There, however, much of the fault lies with US civil society and the churches: if they were more insistent in the humanitarian responsibilities of the US, more would be done.

I return to the Presidential campaign. Twenty three million viewers turned on the Republican debate of 16 September. That is not much, compared with the annual championship match in American football, several times that number. It is a good deal for American politics several months in advance of the party meetings and primary elections which begin early next year. Meanwhile, there is an unexpected and intense Democratic contest for the nomination between Hillary Clinton and the American social democrat Senator Bernard Sanders---with Sanders attracting large crowds and leading Clinton in New Hampshire, the first state in which actual voting will occur. Clinton's campaign has been uninspired but she still has the backing of a large majority of women Democratic voters, and Afro-Americans and Latinos. Sanders appeals across the age and educational spectrum to those angered by the seemingly irreversible rise of economic and social inequality. A large element of uncertainty is whether Vice President Biden, with roots in the white Catholic working class, will enter the contest or not. If he does, he could very well win the nomination, choose one of the many competent Democratic women political figures as Vice Presidential candidate---and begin with a very good chance of victory. However, Trump and the Republicans are convinced that American whites can be persuaded that their nation has been

stolen from them, and that enough of them can be mobilized in a political equivalent of a mob action to reclaim the Presidency. No prediction is possible.